

‘My lines and life’

Poetics of Integrity in George Herbert's
The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations

Selja Johanna Haapasalo



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Thesis Supervisor: Juan Christian Pellicer

‘I am but finite, yet thine infinitely’
George Herbert, *The Temple*

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Introduction

In 'Providence' Herbert reflects on his position as author in relation to the one great authority in his life, God:

O sacred Providence, who from end to end
Strongly and sweetly movest, shall I write,
And not of thee, through whom my fingers bend
To hold my quill? shall they not do thee right? (ll. 1-4)

The stanza is characteristic of Herbert, whose poems offer an interesting case of a poet actively dealing with his own relationship to what he writes about. Several of his poems take up the question of writing in general, and of writing not just poetry, but poetry of praise in particular. Through his verse he acknowledges that the object of his praise, God, is both his end and his means. He is the source of his inspiration as well as his poetic faculties – even his very ability to speak. On the other hand, the poems are, needless to say, Herbert's own writing, his work of art – even his legacy.

The notion of two the agents at work in Herbert's poetry is apparent already in 'The Dedication', and evident through *The Temple* entire, offering an intriguing paradox for the modern reader. In my reading of Herbert, the question soon presented itself: What is the relationship between the poet and God, and more importantly, how does Herbert view the agency of the poet, and that of his God, in relation to creativity? While reading, I juggled in my mind the notion of the poet eternalizing his subject through verse, with the idea of the eternal subject legitimizing, and making the verse possible in the first place.

With this initial interest in Herbert I set out to examine whether it was possible to derive from Herbert's contemplative and devotional poetry in *The Temple* a coherent poetics. My interest focused primarily on the role of the poet in the creative process. What characterizes him, and under what condition does he flourish?

Thesis argument

As a result of my research, this thesis will argue that Herbert develops in *The Temple* a poetics of integrity, and that his theory of poetry suggests both an ideal poet, as well as an ideal reader, rooted in Herbert's own Christian identity.

In order to substantiate this proposition, I have at the beginning of my thesis outlined the metaphysical framework for Herbert's ideal poet found in *The Temple*, which I interpret in light of Herbert's professed Christian faith. I propose at the very start that Herbert works to position the poet's authority over his verse in relation to the authority of the Christian God, through a reading of 'The Collar' as a poet's complaint. The conceptual matrix of authority in which Herbert's poet is situated, is then considered in light of Herbert's views on originality and inspiration. On the basis of the above, and springing from a reading of 'The Dedication' and 'Employment (I)', I proceed to argue that Herbert entertains an idea of dual authority, which I believe to be formative of his poetics. The perception that two authors (human and divine) are at work to bring forth the poem, is further illustrated through a reading of 'The Altar', in which the poem is perceived first as God's work in the poet, and next as the poet's transcribing of that experience – as both act and artefact. Although the division between act and artefact may seem artificial, my aim is to describe constituent parts of a whole, and lay a clear premise for the poetics of integrity, where the two must accord. Through an analysis of Herbert's phrase 'lines and life' in context of the preceding chapters I will finally conclude that Herbert advocates integrity as a qualifying feature of his own verse. In conclusion I will also venture to discuss the role of Herbert's ideal poet and ideal reader in light of his poetics, and as they are presented in *The Temple*.

Thesis title

The thesis title, 'My lines and life', is taken from one of Herbert most anthologized poems, 'The Collar', where the speaker proclaims in a feverish attempt to free himself from the authority of God that his 'lines and life are free' (l. 4).

Read too hastily, 'lines and life' may be mistaken for a rephrasing of 'lifelines', but such an interpretation would limit our reading unnecessarily, as the reference would then be merely to the course of the poet's life, and no longer to life as something juxtaposed with lines of verse. I therefore hasten to point out that 'life' is not read as 'biography' in the course

of this thesis. Instead, I choose to read ‘life’ as simply ‘animate existence’.¹ In a sense my approach is ontological, ‘concerned with the nature or essence of being or existence’,² rather than biographical, concerned with the life of an individual. I have therefore not focused on biographical data in the poems we might link to Herbert, but rather the kind of philosophical framework and religious understanding we find underlying the work, formative of Herbert’s poet. I find it important to emphasize that I am concerned with drawing the contours of the ideal poet that emerges from my reading of *The Temple*, and not the historical figure of George Herbert. Indeed, determining whether Herbert lived up to the poetics of integrity is not at question.

Reading ‘lines’ as referring to lines of verse, and ‘life’ as referring to the poet’s existence as a living creature, the juxtaposition of the two in Herbert’s turn of phrase ‘lines and life’ provides an interesting correlation, which I argue to be illustrative of Herbert’s poetics. The question of ‘life’ emerges most importantly when viewing the poem as act, and ‘lines’ when discussing the poem as artefact.

Reading through Herbert’s works, it may be challenging to know whether the thoughts expressed in the poems apply to the life or the lines of the poet. The correlation of the two is a key concern to this thesis, and therefore a certain qualification as to how the poems are read may be advisable at the very outset: I hold that the Christian ideal of corresponding faith and deeds form a near analogy for Herbert’s use of ‘life and lines’, which ought ideally be in accordance with each other. I do not wish to read into the poems more than is reasonably ‘there’, but certain passages pertaining most clearly to life will in light of the qualification above be argued to apply to writing verse as well.

Thesis structure

This thesis is divided into four parts: an introduction and three chapters. Each chapter is furnished with a chapter overview and followed by a short conclusion. A brief thesis outline will therefore suffice.

Chapter one

The first chapter, ‘Positioning Authority’, presents first a reading of ‘The Collar’, which serves as a useful backdrop for the thesis as a whole, as the notions voiced by the speaker in ‘The Collar’ provide a clear contrast to those of the ideal poet I propose to find in the *The*

¹ OED, ‘life, *n.*’ 3. a.

² OED, ‘ontology, *n.*’ 1. a.

Temple. The discussion of poetic authority is then built around the topics of originality and inspiration. I consider the question of originality in light of both humanism and reformed Christianity, both central doctrines in Herbert's contemporary intellectual and religious climate. Turning to the question of inspiration I argue that being inspired is in Herbert linked to the notion of being born again. I will further endeavour to illustrate how Herbert links together the fear of the Lord and the creative license of the poet. As the previous topics have both entertained the presence of two agents, I will finally argue for a notion of a dual authorship in *The Temple*, where both God and poet work to bring forth the poem. The notion is apparent in poems such as 'The Dedication' and 'Employment (I)', and perhaps best understood through the metaphor of incarnation.

Chapter two

The second chapter, 'The Poet and the Poem', takes up the notion of duality introduced in chapter one, as the poem is understood in its dual nature as both act and artefact. Through a reading of 'The Altar' I will argue that the poet and the poem are closely intertwined. In abstract terms the poem is lived, and understood as an experience or act. The experience is authored on the poet's heart by God through affliction, presenting a recurrent theme in *The Temple*. In concrete terms, the poem is a representation of the experience on paper, and perceived as an artefact. The same essential notion of truth embodied in verse is made clear through the metaphor of the temple, figuring in the volume's very title. I have further sought to clarify the idea of the poem as act through an analysis of the trope of sighs and groans, and by regarding the poems in terms of prayer and praise. The legitimate function of rhetoric is treated in light of the temple metaphor. Finally, the poem as artefact is considered alternatively as a monument of praise, or a 'bait of pleasure' that may entice the reader to enter into spiritual communion with God.

Chapter three

The third and concluding chapter entitled 'Herbert's Poetics' builds on the preceding chapters in a discussion of 'A true Hymne' and the idiom 'lines and life' introduced above, working to explain Herbert's poetics of integrity. The chapter will then turn to the question of the poet's function within the system of authority already established, and his role as both confidant and interpreter of heavenly truth. A third agent in Herbert's poetics is the reader, whose role becomes central when we view the poem as an artefact, no longer an inherent part of the poet's experience but open to interpretation. I will finally argue that Herbert's ideal reader is

meant to function under much the same conditions as his ideal poet. The final chapter will serve as thesis conclusion, at the end of which I briefly sum up the implications of Herbert's poetics of integrity.

Approach

I have based my inquiry on the method of close reading. My object of study has not, however, been the text in isolation. Rather, I have read the poems with reference to literary, historical, and biographical material that inform and contextualize my reading. In so doing, I have sought to arrive at an analysis of Herbert's poetics he with at least some probability was likely to have shared. The 'Intentional Fallacy' coined by Wimsatt and Beardsley stands, of course, as a clear objection to our claiming we could find any real knowledge of the author's intentions. We may, nevertheless, be able to trace how he viewed – or in the least presented – his own role in the creative process, by considering his works in light of the conceptual framework that may reasonably be ascribed to him.

In Herbert's case the context of Christianity is nothing less than axiomatic. Amy Charles provides an excellent biography of the Christian poet, presenting Herbert as scholar, priest and poet.³ According to Izaak Walton, Herbert's first biographer, Herbert attests to the Christian experience as formative of his verse, as he sends the poem's that are to constitute *The Temple* to his friend and fellow clergyman for appraisal:

Say to him, 'Sir, I pray deliver this little book to my dear brother Ferrar, and tell him he shall find in it a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master; in whose service I have now found perfect freedom; desire him to read it; and then, if he can think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul, let it be made public; if not, let him burn it; for I and it are less than the least of God's mercies'.⁴

In order to read Herbert in light of his Christian faith, I have drawn heavily on Scripture as an important pretext to his works. My aim has not been to enter into theological discussion, or to determine Herbert's particular brand of Christianity. I have simply employed Scripture as an interpretative key, in hope of uncovering a poetics that is compatible with Herbert's own world-view.

³ Amy Charles, *A Life of George Herbert* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

⁴ Izaak Walton, *The Life of Mr. George Herbert*, in *George Herbert: The Complete English Works*, ed. by Ann Pasternak Slater (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), pp. 338-385 (p. 380).

Materials

My primary text is George Herbert's *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations*. Within *The Temple* my focus is narrowed to exclude the whole of 'The Church Militant' and most of 'The Church-Porch'. Of the 166 poems in 'The Church', however, I cite or refer to one third in the course of my argument. Although my attention is mainly on the poetry of *The Temple*, two poems not included in the main volume of Herbert's poetry in English shed light on my argument, namely the two Sonnets Herbert sent to his mother from Cambridge. In addition to 'The Dedication' and 'Superliminare', of special interest are poems such as 'The Collar', 'Easter-wings', 'The Flower', 'Employment (I)', 'The Altar', 'The Quidditie', and 'A true Hymne'.

All quotations of Herbert's poems are from *The Works of George Herbert*, edited by F. E. Hutchinson, which provides the standard scholarly edition of *The Temple* as well as the poems in English not included in *The Temple*.⁵ Where the editor has abbreviated reoccurring lines in Herbert's verse with '&c', I have allowed my self to fill in the rest of the line in full. Further, I have replaced the enlarged capital letter at the beginning of the poems in Hutchinson by a regular-sized capital letter. The second letter, also consequently written in capitals, has likewise been altered to lower case throughout. The first three lines of the poems reproduced here are therefore not aligned according to Hutchinson's typography. However, the form of each opening stanza follows the pattern of the rest of the poem in question, when such a pattern is discernable. Where the italics are mine, indicating an emphasis I wish to add to the word or passage, I have stated this in parenthesis; when part of the original typography I have left the emphasis without comment.

A challenging but rewarding stage in the course of my research was transcribing the poems in *The Temple* into digital form. My aim was to be able to search within a single document for words and idioms that appeared frequently throughout Herbert's work, in order to see how key concepts were developed throughout the whole, and thus conduct an even more systematic close reading than would otherwise have been possible. I found no database where Herbert's complete poems were digitally represented to my satisfaction. Although *Literature Online* has more than 200 entries with individual poems by Herbert, I found the material neither suitable for my needs, nor very easily accessible.⁶ The poems were transcribed according to the Cambridge edition of *The Temple* (1633), while I have chosen to

⁵ *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. by F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941).

⁶ *Literature Online* <[http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchTextsByAuthor.do?value\(ByAuthorId\)=1029&listType=All&AuthorDisplayName=George%20Herbert](http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/searchTextsByAuthor.do?value(ByAuthorId)=1029&listType=All&AuthorDisplayName=George%20Herbert)> [Accessed September 2007].

refer to Hutchinson's *Works*. Moreover, the poems recorded in the database appear individually, and not in the context of the whole. The individual poems were neither in the order they appear in *The Temple*, nor arranged alphabetically. The process of transcribing the poems myself proved naturally rewarding in more ways than one, not least in demanding a careful reading of all of the close to two hundred poems at hand.

For Biblical quotations, the choice of the King James Authorized Version (KJV) of 1611 falls naturally, as it gives the standard text of the Bible accessible to Herbert and his contemporaries. In a more systematic search concerning words and idioms used in this translation, the online reference portal *The Bible Gateway* has proved invaluable. By way of exception, I have cited the New International Version (NIV) of 1983, commenting on my choice to do so in the adjacent footnote.

A central study in understanding Herbert's contemporaneous theological and philosophical climate, is Elizabeth Clarke's *Theory and Theology in George Herbert's Poetry*, in which she explores 'questions about the authority of sacred discourse and the validity of poetry'⁷ in relation to Herbert, his times and contemporary thinkers he has been influenced by. Furthermore, Arthur F. Kinney's, *Humanist Poetics: Thought, Rhetoric, and Fiction in Sixteenth-Century England* provides an interesting account of Renaissance humanist trend in poetry.

In my modest attempt at outlining a poetics in Herbert, I do not aim to compete with the book-length studies on Herbert's poetics, such as Helen Vendler's *The Poetry of George Herbert*,⁸ or Arnold Stein's *George Herbert's Lyrics*.⁹ Rather, my study will fall in line with such studies as the very interesting article by John Savoie: 'The Word Within: Predicating the Presence of God in George Herbert's *The Temple*',¹⁰ where he focuses on a particular aspect of Herbert's conceptual universe apparent in his poetry.

Terminology

In the course of my thesis I will employ some terms that warrant definition. First of all, discussing Herbert's poetics it is essential that we distinguish between the actual author and the implied author, or in alternative terms, between the historical and the ideal poet. Anyone

⁷ Elizabeth Clarke, *Theory and Theology in George Herbert's Poetry: 'Divinitie, and Poesie, Met'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 1.

⁸ Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

⁹ Arnold Stein, *George Herbert's Lyrics* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1968).

¹⁰ John Savoie, 'The Word Within: Predicating the Presence of God in George Herbert's *The Temple*', *GHH*, 23 (2000), pp. 55–79.

acquainted with the genre will be well aware that lyric poetry, such as the poetry of *The Temple*, ‘usually expresses the feelings and thoughts of a single speaker (not necessarily the poet himself) in a personal and subjective fashion’.¹¹ M. H. Abrams draws attention to the common misperception of substituting the person speaking in the poem for its author, by stating clearly, that ‘although the lyric is uttered in the first person, the “I” in the poem need not be the poet who wrote it’.¹²

In the following discussion ‘Herbert’ will designate the historical author, whose biography it is possible to trace from historical documents. Although the reference is to a person with any range of personal qualities, I will refer to him, however, primarily in his capacity as author of *The Temple*, and devout Christian. The ‘speaker’ of the poem, on the other hand, is a purely literary construct perhaps best understood as a persona, ‘the “person” (the “I” of an “alter ego”) who speaks in a poem’.¹³ Certain lyrics invite the reader ‘to attribute the voice we hear, and the sentiments it utters, to the poet in his own person’ (p. 227), but ‘even in such personal lyrics [...] both the character and utterance of the speaker may be formalized and altered by the author in a way that is conducive to the desired artistic effect’ (pp. 153-154).

‘Implied author’ provides us with a third, intermediate term. Even though it is ‘related to the actual author, [it] is nonetheless part of the total fiction, whom the author gradually brings into being in the course of his composition, and who plays an important role in the overall effect of a work on the reader’ (p. 228). In my discussion the term ‘poet’, or ‘ideal poet’, will replace the term ‘implied author’. The characteristics of Herbert’s poet are based on ‘the sense of a convincing authorial voice and presence, whose values, beliefs, and moral vision serve implicitly as controlling forces throughout a work’ (p. 228). Here, Herbert’s professed Christian faith stands forth as the one aspect of Herbert’s personal biography that has bearing on my argument. The ‘implied author’, then, is ‘best considered as “a set of implicit norms rather than as a speaker or a voice”’.¹⁴ The same applies to the ‘implied reader’, denoting ‘a “role” or a “standpoint” which allows the (real) reader to assemble the meaning of the text’, referred to in the ensuing discussion as the ‘ideal reader’.¹⁵

¹¹ *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, ed. by J. A. Cuddon, rev. by C. E. Preston (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 481.

¹² M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 8th edn, International Student Edition (London: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), pp. 153-154. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹³ *Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, p. 660.

¹⁴ Jakob Lothe, *Narrative in Fiction and Film: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 19.

¹⁵ Lothe, p. 19.

Secondly, as the discussion moves partly along abstract lines, discussing the relationship between the spiritual and the substantial in Herbert's poetics, I have chosen to incorporate the terms 'matter' and 'form' to my vocabulary. Matter is in Aristotelian scholastic philosophy contrasted with form, and defined by the *OED* as 'that component of a thing which has bare existence but requires an essential determinant (form) to make it a thing of a determinate kind'.¹⁶ Form, on the other hand, is in the same tradition defined as the 'essential determinant principle of a thing; that which makes anything (matter) a determinate species or kind of being; the essential creative quality'.¹⁷ In my use of the terms, 'matter' is equivalent of the Platonic *idea*, or in the Christian setting of the poems, their God-given truth, while 'form' refers to the poem on the page. The terms are most useful when considering Herbert's poetics in light of the principle of incarnation in chapter one, as well as discussing the poem as both act and artefact in chapter two.

¹⁶ *OED*, 'matter, *n.*¹' III. 18. a.

¹⁷ *OED*, 'form, *n.*' 4. a.

1. Positioning Authority

In his article ‘Poetic Origins and Final Phases’ Harold Bloom asserts that ‘poetic strength comes only from a triumphant wrestling with the greatest of the dead, and from an even more triumphant solipsism’.¹⁸ For Herbert, this is clearly not the case. First of all, for him the self is not the only object of real knowledge, far less the whole scope of existence. Secondly, his initial ambition exceeds that described by Bloom, as he is not content in wrestling with Man. Rather, in his campaign for authority he contests God. Through this struggle he finds that poetic strength lies not in triumph of the self, but in submission of the poet to heavenly truths.

Chapter overview

This chapter traces the Christian poet’s positioning and search for poetic authority in relation to his Maker, as we find it in Herbert. The first part of the chapter will examine the status hierarchy between Herbert the poet and God the poet. Our starting-point is one of Herbert’s most well known poems, ‘The Collar’, which skillfully embodies the initial flight of the poet in defiance, and yearning for self-expression, as well as his final submission to, and acknowledgement of his true authority and source of poetic inspiration – God.

While the first part provides a useful background for the ensuing discussion, the main part of the chapter will take up the question of authority from three different angles, considering in close succession the concepts of originality and inspiration in the context of Herbert’s verse, followed by a discussion of the notion of dual authorship that we find marks of in Herbert’s poetics.

Truth and knowledge were in the Renaissance sought mainly through two co-mingling, although not thoroughly compatible ideologies, namely humanism and reformed Christianity. Focusing on the aspect of originality I shall endeavour to situate Herbert’s poet in relation to the two, with reference to ‘The Pulley’. Further, the concepts of poet-maker and poet-prophet (*vates*) as discussed in Sidney’s *A Defense of Poetry* provide us with useful terminology, if

¹⁸ Harold Bloom, ‘Poetic Origins and Final Phases’, in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge, 2nd edn, rev. by Nigel Wood (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000), pp. 218-229 (p. 218).

not a ready template in describing Herbert's ideal poet. Finally, the relationship between truth and verse, a central concern in *The Temple*, is discussed in light of the Jordan-poems, 'Frailtie', and 'Dulnesse'.

Turning to the question of inspiration, we see that in *The Temple* the secular Muse gives way to the Holy Spirit. To understand the dynamics between Herbert's poet and the Holy Spirit, we shall look at how Herbert portrays his relationship to God in poems such as 'Easter-wings' and 'The Flower'.

In 'The Dedication' a curious duality of the origin of the poems is introduced. Through an analysis of 'Employment (1)' I aim to distinguish between the two spheres of authority. The discussion here will also take up Savoie's notion of the presence of God in *The Temple* and what he terms the 'paradox of mutual containing'. The dual aspect is finally understood through the principle of incarnation, explaining the interdependence of the two authorities in making the divine truth intelligible to Man. In this final sense, an analysis of the image of fruit in 'The Dedication' proves illustrative.

A note on 'author' and 'authority'

Poetic strength is in this study understood as a question of poetic authority. 'Authority' is etymologically linked to 'author', both central terms as we set out to examine how Herbert viewed the particular nature of the poet's authority in the process of writing verse.¹⁹ A short note on the concepts 'author' and 'authority' is therefore in order.

The most obvious reference of 'author' is of course 'one who sets forth written statements; the composer or writer of a treatise or book' or as in Herbert's case, poetry. Herbert is, in this sense, the undisputed author of *The Temple*. The title 'author' may, however, denote in a more abstract sense someone 'who originates or gives existence to anything', 'a father', and 'one who has authority'.²⁰ In this sense, Christianity understands God as the author of creation. This last sense of the word bears close affinity to the concept of originator, and in relation to writing verse, is no longer directly linked to the question of who holds the pen. It is in this sense of the word we set out to examine the concept of authority in Herbert.

¹⁹ *OED*, 'authority' [etymology].

²⁰ *OED*, 'author, *n.*' 1., 2. a., 3. a., and 5.

1.1 Wrestling with the Greatest

According to Christian doctrine, Man is given free will either to love or to defy God. The poet's free will in 'The Collar' manifests itself in his initial, explicit decision *not* to submit to the authority of God. This is clear in the opening lines that set the increasingly vehement tone of the poem at the very start: 'I struck the board, and cry'd, No more. | I will abroad' (ll. 1-2).

The poet's complaint

The speaker of the poem goes on to claim that not only has he the right, but that he will indeed use both his life and his talents accordingly, in any way it may happen to please him:

My lines and life are free; free as the rode,
Loose as the winde, as large as store.
Shall I be still in suit? (ll. 4-6)

These seemingly straightforward lines deserve closer attention. Let us first look more closely at line 6. First, 'still' may be translated as 'silent', 'at rest', 'continually', and 'in future as up to the present'.²¹ 'In suit' has alternative meanings as well. We may read it as either 'engaged in a legal prosecution or lawsuit', or 'in priestly garment' (i.e. a suit with a white collar).²² Hence, the following readings of the line are all equally possible: 1) 'Shall I remain quiet in my place of submission to his will who has collared me, although I have a free will to do as I please?', 2) 'Shall I not complain and demand my right through lawsuit against God?', or even 3) 'Need I continue? Is not it enough that I assert my will and freedom as I just have done, and set off?'. The inherent semantic insecurity of this line masterfully depicts the confused mind of the renegade poet.

Another point of interest is found at the beginning of the same line. The feverish question 'Shall I?' (l. 6) betrays the source of the poet's frustration: the fact that he must choose, for indeed, his 'lines and life are free' (l. 4). Free will afforded to him by God gives him the choice either to remain under God's authority or to assert himself. All the while, the question remains: what is there for the poet in this life of servitude – his lines submitted to promote fixed truths, praising the ever-constant God? Self-centeredly, he cries out:

Is the yeare onely lost to me?
Have I no bayes to crown it?
No flowers, no garlands gay? all blasted?
All wasted? (ll. 13-16)

²¹ *OED*, 'still, *a.* and *n.*' A. 2.; 'still, *adv.*' 2., 3. a., and 4. c.

²² *OED*, 'suit, *n.*' II. 9. and V. 19. a.

Disgusted with his poor estate, he resolves to escape and take matters in his own hands; to become the self-made man we are so familiar with:

Not so, my heart: but there is fruit,
And thou hast hands.
Recover all thy sigh-blown age
On double pleasures: [...] (ll. 17-20)

Read as a poet's complaint, the argument in 'The Collar' culminates in the wish for complete poetic freedom, as he disclaims the authority of the law he has served under:

[...] Forsake thy cage,
Thy rope of sands,
Which pettie thoughts have made, and made to thee
Good cable, to enforce and draw,
And be thy law, (ll. 21-25)

The futility of his endeavour to present truth originating in himself is, however, hinted towards even in the very resolution of the poet: 'I will abroad' (ll. 2,28), as Herbert uses the word 'abroad' to exquisite ironical effect. 'Abroad' may be understood as 'at large; freely moving about', the poet's resolution most readily paraphrased as 'I want to attain free artistic scope'. Another ready reading, 'out of the home country; in or into foreign lands' carries in the Christian setting of the poem an uneasy allusion to damnation. The final irony, however, is evident when we read 'abroad' as 'wide of the mark or the truth'.²³ This last reading of the word is more modern than the other two and probably not intended by Herbert. Its implications, however, are not far fetched, as for a Christian poet such as Herbert, being away from God – who is truth – is to go astray.

Return of the prodigal son

In quite another strain than the one we have followed above, a resolutely subservient Herbert writes in 'Sonnet (II)':

Each Cloud distills thy praise, and doth forbid
Poets to turn it to another use.
Roses and *Lillies* speak thee; and to make
 A pair of Cheeks of them, is thy abuse. (ll. 4-7)

In a letter to his mother, Herbert explains: ‘my meaning (*dear Mother*) is in these Sonnets, to declare my resolution to be, that my poor Abilities in *Poetry*, shall be all, and ever

²³ *OED*, ‘abroad’ 2., 4., and 5.

consecrated to Gods glory.’²⁴ In order to understand this difference in tone from that of ‘The Collar’ we are prompted to ask: what is it that has made the poet surrender?

A clue is found at the very end of ‘The Collar’. The poetic persona grows ‘more fierce and wilde’ (l. 33), until he all of a sudden turns completely as he relinquishes his violent attack and is subdued. He realizes that he is not called into mere servitude, recognizing his true identity as a child of God:

But as I rav’d and grew more fierce and wilde
At every word,
Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Child!*
And I reply’d, *My Lord.* (ll. 33-36)

God thus calms down his disconcerted child, creating peace with one word of affection and recognition. We may compare this with another poem by Herbert. In ‘Redemption’ the poet finds his suit actually granted: ‘there I him espied, | Who straight, *Your suit is granted*, said, & died’ (ll. 13-14). The suit here is not claiming the right to walk one’s own road; to fly off abroad, but all the same to be granted a better lot in life. In both ‘The Collar’ and ‘Redemption’ the answer, or resolution, carries a reference to salvation. Salvation in the Christian sense is closely linked to becoming a child of God: ‘But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.’²⁵ The message of the two poems merged together might be put like this: ‘Your suit is granted, my child’. At this realization, the poet at once relinquishes his heated attack: ‘And I reply’d, *My Lord*’, his return imitating that of the prodigal son. In ‘The Collar’ he is reminded of his rightful position; in ‘Redemption’ he is invited to take his place.

1.2 Originality

We may identify in the course of Herbert’s life three distinct roles – that of a Cambridge orator, priest of the Church of England, and author of *The Temple* and other poems. As orator, Herbert’s area of expertise was language in its potentially deceitful nature. As priest, his profession was to be the advocate of truth. As a poet, he rather paradoxically set out using the tools of the first to reach towards what the latter aspired. Characteristic of the orator turned priest, what ensued was a combination of art and heart. Herbert’s verse presents in this respect

²⁴ *Works*, p. 363.

²⁵ John 1. 12-13 (KJV).

an intriguing paradox, considering the cultural and intellectual backdrop of seventeenth century England, with its ‘universal concern that preoccupation with the “husk” of words could divert attention from the “kernel” of truth’.²⁶

Humanism and Christianity

According to Margo Todd, ‘Northern or Christian humanists’ love of ancient literature was conditioned neither by abstract aesthetic commitments nor by secularized philosophical inclinations, but rather by their devotion to a biblical reformation of Christendom.’²⁷

Although it was an ‘intentionally pious reformism which distinguished northern from southern European humanism in the sixteenth century’,²⁸ it was as early as in the fifteenth century Italy that the influential humanist philosopher, Marsilio Ficino, synthesized humanist thought with Christian faith, as he insisted on ‘man’s inherent capacities because of the universality of the human mind and [saw] in this man’s fundamental affinity with God’.²⁹

Man has in other words infinite inherent potential to evolve: ‘The Creator gave him the germs of every sort of life. Depending on whatever potentiality he develops, he may become a plant, an animal, a celestial being, an angel, or he may even be unified with God Himself’ (p. 5). The idea was formed, and which soon prevailed, that ‘being educable, man might also be perfectible’ (p. 5).

The humanist notion of Man’s capacity to progress towards and potentially reach perfection, and ‘pessimistic Protestant ideas about lack of free will and the innate sinfulness and imperfectibility of human nature’³⁰ may, however, be seen to be ultimately at odds. Arthur F. Kinney points to the incompatibility of the two in rather harsh terms: ‘the possibilities for amelioration and advancement [within humanist thought] remain eternal and infinite. But such fiction does not contemplate so powerful a movement as the Protestant Reformation with its brutal wars and its ugly pronouncements on man’s natural depravity’ (p. 37). Holding a more moderate view, Todd urges us to ‘recognize that for the Christian humanist there need be no conflict between the teachings of the Bible and a belief in great

²⁶ Clarke, p. 1.

²⁷ Margo Todd, *Christian Humanism and the Puritan Social Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 23.

²⁸ Todd, p. 23.

²⁹ Arthur F. Kinney, *Humanist Poetics: Thought, Rhetoric, and Fiction in Sixteenth-Century England* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), p. 4. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

³⁰ Mary Thomas Crane, ‘Early Tudor Humanism’, in *A Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture*, ed. by Michael Hattaway (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 13-26 (p. 17).

human potential for achievement'.³¹ However, she too grants that Christian humanist did struggle 'to combine a sense of the gravity of sin with their reformist optimism'.³² The breach was felt by writers such as the humanist and Catholic Sir Thomas More, whose *Utopia* 'directly confronts the gap between humanist hopes and ideals and the realities of human nature',³³ and is therefore suspected of actually depicting a dystopia. I am inclined to share Kinney's assessment that, ultimately, 'the tradition foundered because it had rested its lessons on the educability of men who seemed, after a century of lessons, to be unteachable' (p. 17).

Humanism, then, delighted in the 'resourcefulness, flexibility, and fictionality' of language (p. 11), while the religious paradigm of sixteenth century England viewed language with suspicion. Indeed, the 'aim of [humanist rhetoric] "was not in general to make truth prevail, but to make one side of a debatable question seem as plausible as possible and then turn around and make the other side of the question seem just as plausible' (p. 11). Focusing on the virtues of eloquence, one might 'talk wisdom or foolishness—and who would distinguish?' (p. 17). Not everyone approved, and some humanist advocates of education indeed pointed out 'such potential failings and delusions of eloquence' (p. 17). Kinney reproduces the following definitions from Thomas Elyot's *Dictionary* of 1538 as an example:

The corruption of *sophia* ("wysedome") by the *sophos* ("a wyse man") into *sophisma* ("a craftye and deceytefull sentence, an Oracyon or inuention, whiche seemeth to be trewe, what it is false") by a *sophista* ("a dissembler of wysedome, a deceyuer vnder an eloquente or crafty speakynge". (pp. 25-26)

The classical models of Renaissance humanist thought had also commented on the unfavourable breach between rhetoric and substance or truth, as Kinney also points out:

In the *Protagoras* Socrates locates the weakness of the sophists in their exclusion of matter for manner [...] He presses the attack further yet in the *Phaedrus*: a man should train himself "not to undergo for the sake of speaking and acting before men, but that he may be able to [please] the gods". (p. 19)

In the writings of Seneca and Plato, humanist poetics find, however, a solution. The philosophers present altogether five causes that constitute art: 'the material, the agent, the make-up, the model, and the end-in-view' (pp. 33-34). It is the fifth cause, better known as the Platonic *idea*, that as a 'basis of humanist poetics [...] takes rhetoric and poetics past the dangers [...] of sophistry' (p. 34). Thus 'humanist poetics is both philosophically and rhetorically grounded; it marries both chief interests of the humanist educators. Ethical and

³¹ Todd, p. 23.

³² Todd, p. 28.

³³ Crane, p. 23.

stylistic models are alike appealed to' (p. 35). However, as following any sort of ethical standard demands conscious human effort, the problem of sin combined with Protestant distrust of human nature introduced above has as yet not been solved. In 'Ironic Humanism in *The Temple*', Richard Strier asserts that 'sin is the concept that divides the Reformation view of man from all forms of Christian humanism'.³⁴ He explains:

When sin is conceived of as an existential condition rather than as merely another name for moral turpitude or failure, it is irreconcilable with any rationalistic approach to man's moral stature and capacities. It becomes, as Rudolph Otto would say, a specifically religious rather than an ethical category. (p. 44)

This seemingly minor breach in congruity is perhaps not so minor after all. On the contrary, I believe it to be formative of Herbert's view on poetic authority.

Strier works to examine Herbert's position in relation to Christian, or ethical, humanism from the point of view of Calvinistic Reformation theology. In contrast with the assumption that if man only exerts himself he may reach perfection, his argument that 'Reformation theology is deeply and fundamentally antihumanistic' (p. 33) provides an interesting angle to our reading of Herbert.

'The Pulley' works to show Herbert's view on the abilities of Man in relation to God. The first stanza celebrates the talents afforded to Man:

When God at first made man,
Having a glasse of blessings standing by;
Let us (said he) poure on him all we can:
Let the worlds riches, which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span. (ll. 1-5)

The description is indeed evocative of the notion that God furnished man with 'the germs of every sort of life'.³⁵ The plot of the poem comes, however, suddenly to a halt: 'When almost all was out, God made a stay' (l. 8). What follows is according to Strier, 'from the point of view of ethical humanism [...] a highly disturbing stanza' (p. 41):

For if I should (said he)
Bestow this jewell also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts in stead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature:
So both should losers be. (ll. 11-15)

³⁴ Richard Strier, 'Ironic Humanism in *The Temple*', in "*Too Rich to Clothe the Sunne*": *Essays on George Herbert*, ed. by Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), pp. 33-52 (p. 44). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

³⁵ Kinney, p. 5.

Strier identifies ‘Nature’ (l. 14) as ‘primarily human, not physical nature’ (p. 42). The notion parallels that of Paul’s epistle to Romans, where the fallen Man is depicted as one who ‘changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator’.³⁶ Strier explains: ‘To the Reformation Protestant, adoration is an emotion due only to God, from whose crown of exclusive worship “we dare not” steal.’ (p. 42) Lines 13-14, then, take up ‘the possibility of a purely secular humanism, of the humanist ideal becoming an idol’ (p. 42), while showing the inherent danger in such self-love against the backdrop of Scripture.

The significance of God holding back the rest – however small – of his ‘treasure’ (l. 9) is to maintain that he is ever – if only slightly – beyond the sphere of mere mortals, and remains that for which they long for and adore. Had Man shared in all of God’s riches, the latter would have become superfluous. The final stanza of ‘The Pulley’ shows the ultimate motive Herbert perceives for God having held back the rest of his everything:

Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlesnesse:
Let him be rich and wearie, that at least,
If goodnesse leade him not, yet wearinesse
May tesse him to my breast (ll. 16-20)

The end in view is for the poet to enter into an intimate relationship with his Maker, through an acknowledgement of his place in creation as ultimately dependent on God’s grace. Instead of usurping the throne, the Christian poet may enjoy the position of son, tossed to his father’s heart, a position won by way of humility.

Poet-maker and poet-prophet

In the above, humanism in Herbert’s England is seen in relation to the contemporaneous Reformation climate. I hold, however, that the question of origins presents a clear point of departure between humanist and Christian ideas also on a more theoretical level than is apparent from Herbert’s relationship to the particularly Renaissance brand of Christian humanism. Making it possible to argue along such lines, the *OED* provides us with the following definition of humanism: ‘Any system of thought or action which is concerned with merely human interests (as distinguished from divine).’³⁷ The definition is suggestive of Man’s central position within the humanist world-view. Still, it is rather general, and does not

³⁶ Romans 1. 25 (KJV).

³⁷ *OED*, ‘humanism’ 3.

directly contrast its preoccupation with Man with the centrality of God within the Christian system of belief. In order to find a view that directly contrasts humanist and Christian ideas of creation and originality, I have turned to the Marxist literary critic Pierre Macherey. In *A Theory of Literary Production* he maintains that humanism quite naturally claims for Man the role of originator.³⁸

The proposition that the writer or artist is a creator belongs to a humanist ideology. In this ideology man is released from his function in an order external to himself [God], restored to his so-called powers. Circumscribed only by the resources of his own nature, he becomes the maker of his own laws.³⁹

In relation to Herbert I read Macherey's phrase 'the order external to himself' as the Christian God, who in his infinite nature transcends the finite existence of Man. On the premises of this narrow but useful take on humanism, let us consider Sidney's poet-maker, which I argue to be an essentially humanist concept, compared with the ideal poet we see implied in Herbert. For the sake of the argument, we may liken – although not completely identify – the latter with Sidney's concept of the poet as *vates*, or poet-prophet, fashioned by divine inspiration.

Macherey asserts that 'the purest product of humanism is the religion of art',⁴⁰ where poetic truth, or the autonomy of the work is central. Sidney, in a similar vein, asserts that 'poesy must not be drawn by the ears; it must be gently led, or rather it must lead—which was partly the cause that made the ancient-learned affirm it was a divine gift, and no human skill'.⁴¹ The notion of self-determination of the poet's work is thus held on to (it must lead), 'it' referring, however, to poesy – a concept – rather than a specific reference to an 'other', such as the God of Christianity. With this world-view Sidney describes the independent and 'more excellent' poet-maker, as opposed to the 'noble' poet-prophet (p. 26).

The following quotations bring out the essence of Sidney's poet-maker: 'Only the poet [...] lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature' (p. 23). 'Nature' here refers to creation. He is 'not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit' (p. 24). Sidney – as opposed to the 'ancient-learned' (p. 63) – links the concept to a craft; poetry to human

³⁸ Within the limits of this chapter, the terms 'creator', 'originator', and 'maker' are used interchangeably.

³⁹ Pierre Macherey, 'Creation and Production', in *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. by Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 66-68 (p. 66).

⁴⁰ Macherey, p. 67.

⁴¹ Sidney, *A Defense of Poetry*, ed. by Jan Van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 63. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

skill; presenting Man as the originator. The poet-maker as originator stands in contrast with the world-view based on Scripture, which describes a finite creation:

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new? it hath been already of old time, which was before us.⁴²

What, then, are the things ‘such as never were in nature’ (p. 23)? Sidney provides his reader with some examples: ‘Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies, and such like.’ (p. 23) The chimera, which may be taken as a prime example of such quite new creation, is indeed an unnatural creature of the imagination, but nevertheless constructed of parts of different creatures we already know. As such it is in itself nothing substantially new, but a collage of things we recognise from other settings. From the Christian point of view this creation, is perhaps better described as circular reproduction, as Macherey also points out: ‘He creates. What does he create? Man.’⁴³ This notion of the limitations of human scope to what *is*; to creation of which he is part, is ironically present even in the lament of the poet in ‘The Collar’: ‘My lines and life are free; *free as the rode, | Loose as the winde, as large as store*’ (ll. 4-5, my italics). Man is, in other words, not infinitely free, but free merely within the limitations of creation.

Within Christian theology we might – running the risk of oversimplification, but here simply in order to clarify the notion – even assert that, as God is the only one who truly *is* (The Great I AM), all we can find out will ultimately have to do with him, or with what he has done. He encompasses all knowledge, and everything beyond knowledge must be revealed to us through divine revelation. Sidney does certainly acknowledge ‘the heavenly Maker of that maker, who [...] made man to His own likeness’ (p. 24), and as such surpasses the poet-maker ‘as eternity exceedeth a moment’ (p. 31). Indeed, his appraisal of the lyric links it closely with devotional poetry, as it ‘sometimes raiseth up his voice to the heights of the heavens, in singing the lauds of the immortal God’ (p. 46). The poet may – at will – sing

the praises of the immortal beauty: the immortal goodness of that God who giveth us hands to write and wits to conceive; of which we might well want words, but never matter; of which we could turn our eyes to nothing, but we should ever have new-budding occasions. (p. 69)

⁴² Ecclesiastes 1. 9-10 (KJV).

⁴³ Macherey, p. 66.

But, in the end, as the poet-maker ‘citeth no authorities [...] in truth, not labouring to tell you what is or is not, but what should or should not be’ (p. 53). Herbert’s ‘scriptural poetics’⁴⁴ stands in clear contrast to Sidney’s notion of the independent originator. In *The Temple*, Herbert both integrates and reworks Scripture, a trait I will discuss in more detail toward the end of this chapter.

The poet-maker, then, has ‘no law but wit’ (p. 26). That is, his own capabilities are all that may restrict him. The law the speaker in ‘The Collar’ finds inhibiting and opts to break free from illustrates the ‘order external to himself’:⁴⁵

[...] Forsake thy cage,
Thy rope of sands,
Which pettie thoughts have made, and made to thee
Good cable, to enforce and draw,
And be thy law, (ll. 21-25)

The speaker mocks the law he has served under, characterizing it as a ‘rope of sands’, as something with no coherence or binding power.⁴⁶ The law is made efficient only through his adherence, as ‘pettie thoughts’ have in the past made it ‘Good cable’. It is something he may choose to adhere to, or to disregard. However, as discussed in relation to the poet’s impulse to simply run off abroad, flight from the authority this law represents, entails in ‘The Collar’ the notion of going wrong.

The violent self-assertion of the poet in ‘The Collar’ contains the seed of the poet-maker, yearning to be free from the authority of God. He claims the right to use his poetry (his lines) and his life as he sees fit. Opting for the position of the poet-maker, the implications of his choice are clear: he would rather create new realities like God himself in the beginning created the world through his word;⁴⁷ to found a poetic truth based on his own will, his own words – a trend we may link to humanism – rather than promote God’s eternal truth, which we in relation to Herbert rightly associate with Christianity.

Sidney’s poet-prophet on the other hand offers us an alternative model, as he ‘imitate[s] the unconceivable excellencies of God’ (p. 25), a condition the poet in ‘The Collar’ wishes to flee. While humanism exhilarates in the originality and abilities of Man, Herbert wittily points out in ‘Vanitie (I)’, commenting on Man’s accomplishments in the field of

⁴⁴ Savoie, p. 57.

⁴⁵ Macherey, p. 66.

⁴⁶ *OED*, ‘rope, *n*¹.’ ll. 5. b.

⁴⁷ ‘And God said, Let there be light: and there was light’ Genesis 1. 3 (KJV); ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made’ John 1. 1-3 (KJV).

science and discovery, but nevertheless illustrative of the point in general: ‘What hath not man sought and found, | But his deare God?’ (ll. 22-23). Even more disillusioned with Man’s conceit, he goes on: ‘Poore man, thou searchest round | To finde out *death*, but missest *life* at hand’ (ll. 27-28). Devotional poetry, rather than delighting in human wit, has the aim of centering and concentrating on its object of praise, which is not Man, but ‘the other’; in Christian devotional poetry such as Herbert’s, the Creator rather than creation. In this position of Sidney’s poet-prophet, Herbert ‘showeth himself a passionate lover of that unspeakable and everlasting beauty to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith’ (p. 22).

Herbert’s contemporaries thought the link between poet and prophet quite likely, although they did not necessarily endorse it. The notion was not unheard of for the Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University, who is reported to have said that ‘although Herbert “was a Divine Poet . . . I hope the World will not take him to be an Inspired Prophet”’.⁴⁸ The danger of so doing would be that his poems could be adopted ‘to support any particular shade of religious opinion’⁴⁹ in a time of reform. Although not apt to identify Herbert’s cultural role, the concept of the poet-prophet serves, however, to illuminate the poet’s relationship to an authority beyond and above his own.

Considering the notion of poetic strength, it is the devotional poet, who in light of the argument above is filled with potential, in contrast to the poet-maker, who ‘only bringeth *his own stuff*, and doth not learn a conceit out of a matter, but maketh matter for a conceit’ (p. 48, my italics). Macherey asserts:

The question of ‘man’ [as his own god] involves unresolvable contradictions: how can man change without becoming other? So he must be protected, allowed to remain as he is: forbidden to transform his condition. The ideology of humanism is spontaneously and profoundly reactionary both in theory and in practice. The only activity allowed to the man-god is the preservation of his identity.⁵⁰

Implicitly, his argument juxtaposes the notion of humanist creation – or reproduction – with the Christian faith in the inherent capacity of the Christian to grow into maturity as he follows Christ. As he yearns to become like the other, he is transformed to his image through grace: ‘For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.’⁵¹ Indeed, the most poignant contrast

⁴⁸ Clarke, p. 12.

⁴⁹ Clarke, p. 12.

⁵⁰ Macherey, p. 67.

⁵¹ Romans 8. 29 (KJV).

between humanist and Christian thinking is that humanism trusts the abilities of Man with or without God, while the Christian faith teaches that although Man is the glory of creation created in God's own image, he is ultimately a fallen creature in need of grace. This difference, then, presents the Christian poet with endless opportunities at exploring the 'order external to himself', or – dare we say it? – Truth.

'Is there in truth no beautie'

In his *Defence*, Sidney states that 'the skill of each artificer standeth in that *idea* or fore-conceit of the work, and not in the work itself. And that the poet hath that *idea* is manifest, by delivering them forth in such excellency as he had imagined them' (p. 24). While the poet-maker is to conceive of an idea, Herbert's poet is to discover truth. The difference is subtle, for which reason I shall endeavour to be more accurate.

Sidney compares the poet-maker to the historian and the moral philosopher, allotting the subject of the particular to history, of the abstract to moral philosophy, and of the universal to poetry.⁵² The universal, the abstract, and the particular are all aspects of truth, and in Christian devotional poetry, such as Herbert's, they are fused together in the object of praise – the transcendent God become immanent in Christ. In abstract terms he is Love.⁵³ In particular terms he is Christ.⁵⁴ In his omnipotence, he extends over and comprehends the whole scope of Man, as he is the 'Alpha and Omega'.⁵⁵ This does certainly not fall short of the universal. The object of Herbert's poet is thus as comprehensive as that of Sidney's poet-maker. In fact, it includes the entire spectrum from the particular to the universal. In 'Dulnesse' Herbert sums up the notion rather effectively: 'When all perfections as but one appeare, | That those thy form doth show' (ll. 13-14). In God 'all perfections' appear as one, made intelligible in Christ.

In 'Jordan (II)' the poet sets out initially to clothe his vision of God's truth in the finest phrasing he could conceive of, in an attempt at doing it justice:

When first my lines of heav'nly joyes made mention,
Such was their lustre, they did so excell,
That I sought out quaint words, and trim invention; (ll. 1-3)

However, the effect of his fine art was not quite what he was after, that is, to show and convey the truth of God. Instead, he succeeds in obscuring it:

⁵² Sidney, pp. 28-38.

⁵³ 1 John 4. 16 (KJV).

⁵⁴ John 14. 9 (KJV).

⁵⁵ Revelation 1. 8 (KJV).

My thoughts began to burnish, sprout, and swell,
Curling with metaphors a plain intention,
Decking the sense, [...] (ll. 4-6)

He deplores his own attempt 'to clothe the sunne' (l. 11), in effect succeeding only in covering the light with – albeit beautiful – cloth. In the middle of his feverish production as he sets out to honour the immensity and beauty of the revelation he had received, a new voice cuts in, delivering a final blow to his illusion of self-sufficiency. The poet's illusion of being able to bring forth the ultimate line of praise originating in his own self is bluntly crushed:

But while I bustled, I might heare a friend
Whisper, *How wide is all this long pretence!*
There is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd:
Copie out onely that, and save expense. (ll. 15-18)

In 'Frailtie' Herbert attacks the question of truth and appearances from another angle, as he in rather direct terms expresses a scorn of worldly notions of excellence, which he deems to be at best transient or superficial:

Lord, in my silence how do I despise
What upon trust
Is styled *honour, riches, or fair eyes;*
But is *fair dust!*
I surname them *gilded clay,*
Deare earth, fine grasse or hay;
In all, I think my foot doth ever tread
Upon their head. (ll. 1-8)

The speaker attacks blind adherence to 'What upon trust | Is *styled*' (ll. 2-3, my italics), and not to what *is*, his argument being that without stopping to examine the true nature of things, we are all too apt to trust even non-substantiated rhetoric. He is, however, quick to admit:

But when I view abroad both Regiments;
The worlds, and thine:
Thine clad with simplenesse, and sad events;
The other fine,
Full of glorie and gay weeds,
Brave language, braver deeds:
That which was dust before, doth quickly rise,
And prick mine eyes. (ll. 9-16)

In 'Dulnesse' the speaker's jealousy of the secular love-poet is blatant:

The wanton lover in a curious strain
Can praise his fairest fair;
And with quaint metaphors her curled hair
Curl o're again. (ll. 5-8)

Some lines further on, the irony seems almost too cruel: ‘Lovers are still pretending, & ev’n wrongs | Sharpen their Muse’ (ll. 19-20).

In ‘Jordan (I)’ the speaker addresses the authority of these bold assertions, that were in ‘Dulnesse’ ascribed to flesh: ‘Who sayes that fictions onely and false hair | Become a verse?’ (ll. 1-2), posing a fundamental question: ‘Is there in truth no beautie?’ (l. 2). In conclusion to ‘Sonnet (II)’ he provides an answer: ‘Lord, in thee | The *beauty* lies in the *discovery*’ (ll. 13-14).

For Herbert poetic inspiration is not so much a matter of his own genius, but arriving at an acknowledgement of a higher, eternal truth, which entails submission to an understanding beyond his particular degree of excellence. In ‘Dulnesse’ the speaker proclaimed in spite of the incumbent flesh: ‘Thou art my lovelinesse, my life, my light, | Beautie alone to me’ (ll. 9-10). Similarly to the historian, who is according to Sidney ‘captivated to the truth of a foolish world’ (pp. 37-38), Herbert is captivated to heavenly truth. This entails ‘the subservience of the human words of poetic composition to the poem’s God-given truth’.⁵⁶

1.3 Inspiration

In his foreword to *The Temple*, Nicholas Ferrar makes reference to what he deemed Herbert’s source of inspiration:

The dedication of this work having been made by the Authour to the *Divine Majestie* onely, how should we now presume to interest any mortall man in the patronage of it? Much lesse think we it meet to seek the recommendation of the Muses, for that which himself was confident to have been inspired by a diviner breath then flows from *Helicon*.⁵⁷

Let us examine the notion of being inspired by ‘diviner breath’ in relation to Herbert’s Christian faith. ‘Inspire’ stems from the Latin ‘*inspirare*’, which translates to ‘to blow or breath into’.⁵⁸ The word reflects what is described in Genesis: ‘And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.’⁵⁹ Herbert’s confidence draws from this Christian myth of origins, as

⁵⁶ Mark Taylor, *The Soul in Paraphrase: George Herbert’s Poetics*, Series Practica, XCII (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), p. 3.

⁵⁷ *Works*, p. 3.

⁵⁸ *OED*, ‘inspire, v.’ [etymology].

⁵⁹ Genesis 2. 7 (KJV).

Man was in Genesis infused with spirit, or in a word, inspired. Man partook of God's own nature as he was created in the image of God: 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.'⁶⁰

The New Testament echoes this notion as, Adam, the first man, is in Christ's genealogy referred to as the son of God.⁶¹ After the fall, however, Man can no longer claim this original spiritual kinship to God. He has another father to whom he bears likeness:

Jesus said unto them, If God were your Father, ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me. [...] Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.⁶²

Having lost his divine nature as a result of the fall, Man no longer naturally abides in truth. In order to come back to the source of inspiration for the Christian poet, it is not enough to visit the Muses on Helicon and be intoxicated by their influence. In order to be 'inspired' – to enjoy kinship with the Spirit of God – the poet must be born again:

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. [...] Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.⁶³

It is this position of a child of God the speaker in 'The Collar' is reminded of, and to which he in the end is again reconciled. In the two Jordan poems the image of baptism highlights the importance of being born again, signifying a crossing.

Crossing Jordan

The shared title of the two Jordan-poems has been variously interpreted. An interpretation that seems to have gained ground is treated among others by Taylor, who agrees with Grosart that 'the river Jordan stands to the divine poet in the same relation as the Helicon to the secular poet'.⁶⁴ In light of the above, however, I do not agree the comparison to be fitting. Moreover, in Scripture the place of divine revelation is not in the valley, but consistently on a mountain. A fitting parallel to the muses' mountain in Bæotia would therefore be either mount Sinai, or

⁶⁰ Genesis 1. 27 (KJV).

⁶¹ 'Adam, which was the son of God' Luke 3. 38 (KJV).

⁶² John 8. 42, 44 (KJV).

⁶³ John 3. 3, 5-6 (KJV).

⁶⁴ Taylor, p. 28.

even Horeb, ‘mountain of God’.⁶⁵ Secondly, the river Jordan is not the goal of the journey, but represents a crossing into the new. It does not afford refreshment or inspiration, such as the fountains of Aganippe and Hippocrene that flow on Helicon. Indeed, the Israelites crossed the Jordan dry-footed,⁶⁶ their goal being the Promised Land on the opposite bank.

The chief implication of the Jordan in the New Testament is to baptism, which again signifies a crossing. Even the Apostle Paul draws a parallel between baptism and the crossing of the Red Sea.⁶⁷ In baptism the believer re-enacts this chronicled crossing on the spiritual plane, from the world (Egypt) through death in the water to new life in Christ (The Promised Land).⁶⁸ The Jordan-poems are both concerned with a crossing, ‘Jordan (I)’ from fiction to truth, ‘Jordan (II)’ from invention to transcription. The spring that nourishes the poet is found in the land of milk and honey, provided for by Providence, not in the river, which marks a boarder line. This notion of crossing from death to life parallels the idea of being born again, symbolizing a transition from the desert of our own circumstances – our own understanding – to God’s plenty and wisdom.

Helen Wilcox has noted the reference to crossing the Jordan to the Promised land, explaining its significance: ‘the poem attempts to find a way into the enticing territory of devotional verse, where the basic poetic materials, like the Jews themselves, remain the same, but the perspective, and “sweetnesse”, are radically new’.⁶⁹ Her interpretation of the allusion to baptism stresses poetic renewal, as it stands for ‘the sort of spiritual cleansing and renewal which the poet seeks for his “lines”’.⁷⁰ In a complementary reading, Rosemund Tuve describes Jordan as a ‘Christian symbol of redemptive purification and of entrance into union with Christ as Heavenly Love incarnate’.⁷¹ When Christ himself was baptised, the Holy Spirit descended on him: ‘And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him.’⁷² Recognising the importance of this to the Christian poet is essential to our reading of Herbert. Once he has crossed over from death to life, the poet may understand spiritual truths:

⁶⁵ Exodus 3. 1 (KJV).

⁶⁶ Joshua 3. 17 (KJV).

⁶⁷ I Corinthians 10. 1-2 (KJV).

⁶⁸ Romans 6. 3-8 (KJV).

⁶⁹ Helen Wilcox, ‘George Herbert’, in *The Cambridge Companion to English Poetry: Donne to Marvell*, ed. by Thomas N. Corns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 183-199 (p. 194).

⁷⁰ Wilcox, p. 194.

⁷¹ Taylor, p. 29.

⁷² Matthew 3. 16 (KJV).

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.⁷³

Flying with the Spirit

Herbert acknowledges God as the source of his very ability to speak, as he complains in 'Deniall': 'O that thou shouldst give dust a tongue' (l. 16). Even more significantly to our discussion, he acknowledges at the start of the poem that his connection to God is crucial to the perfection of his verse:

When my devotions could not pierce
 Thy silent eares;
Then was my heart broken, as was my verse:
 My breast was full of fears
 And disorder: (ll. 1-5)

In order to mend his verse, he calls upon his creator to 'cheer and tune my heartlesse breast, | | And mend my ryme' (ll. 26, 30).

In 'Easter-wings' Herbert takes up the topic of Man's insufficiency and his desperate need of divine assistance yet again. The typography of the poem masterfully underlines the subject-matter, which is why I have chosen to quote it here in full. In order to be consistent, the typography of the poem here follows that of Hutchinson's *Works*. To my knowledge, no earlier printed version or manuscript of 'Easter-wings' has aligned the lines at centre, but consistently to the left. This variation in typography does not in my opinion, however, affect our reading of the poem, nor diminish the importance of the form to our analysis. In both instances, the stanzas create a pattern that resembles two pairs of wings. Alignment to the left indeed creates a stronger illusion of a sparrow in speedy flight, while Hutchinson's version underlines the aspect of Man becoming 'Most thinne' (l. 15).

⁷³ I Corinthians 2. 12-14 (KJV).

Easter-wings.

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poore:
With thee
O let me rise
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did beginne:
And still with sicknesses and shame
Thou didst so punish sinne,
That I became
Most thinne.
With thee
Let me combine
And feel this day thy victorie:
For, if I imp my wing on thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.⁷⁴

The movement of both the subject-matter and form of the poem work together to accentuate the underlying argument, which closely follows the Christian tale of the fall of Man and promise of salvation: Man decays from glory because of the fall and his subsequent sinful nature. Created in the image of God, he once enjoyed his paradisaal existence 'in wealth and store' (l. 1), but having sinned against him, 'lost the same' (l. 2). As result of original sin, each person's life now begins 'in sorrow' (l. 11). The depraved state of Man is, however, only part of the reality Herbert examines. The lines 'Most poore'/'Most thinne' (ll. 5, 15) stand together with the reoccurring line 'With thee' (ll. 6, 16), occupying the focal point in both stanzas, where the diagonal lines that move along the contours draw an 'X' that marks the spot. The form thus creates a forceful concentration on the problem paired with the solution. Man alone does not have what it takes to fly, but together with the Spirit he may combine and rise from this state of poverty.

The Holy Spirit as the divine agent in the poem is implied by the allusion to the wing, which in all likelihood belongs to the dove Herbert alludes to in several poems, such as 'Miserie': 'the wing of thy milde Dove' (l. 28), and Sonnet (i): 'Cannot thy *Dove* | Out-strip

⁷⁴ *Works*, p. 43.

their *Cupid* easily in flight?' (ll. 8-9). The dove is, of course, a well-established biblical symbol of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁵

The metaphor of flight itself is central, as the speaker 'Easter-wings' yearns to 'rise | As larks, harmoniously, | And sing' (ll. 7-9). The symbolic value of the poet's desire to fly is 'not only the desire for independent action, but also the symbol of ascension on the level of thought or morality; but it is an ascension which is more imaginary and erratic than proportionate to real needs or capabilities'.⁷⁶ In 'Easter' Herbert again employs the image of rising, linking it firmly to the image of the resurrected Christ:

Rise heart; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise
Without delays,
Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise
With him mayst rise: (ll. 1-4)

Likewise, the flight imagined in 'Easter-wings' is markedly not independent, as the poet cries: Let me 'imp my wing on thine' (l. 19). The central line 'With thee' (ll. 6, 16) in 'Easter-wings', denoting a reciprocal enterprise between God and poet, is recurrent in poems such as 'Whitsunday', where Herbert calls for the Holy Spirit to join in him:

Listen sweet Dove unto my song,
And spread thy golden wings in me;
Hatching my tender heart so long,
Till it get wing, and flie away with thee. (ll. 1-4)

The notion is strongly evocative of Paul's letter to Romans: 'But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you.'⁷⁷ In 'Trinitie Sunday' the notion is echoed yet again:

Enrich my heart, mouth, hands in me,
With faith, with hope, with charitie;
That I may runne, rise, rest with thee. (ll. 7-9)

In 'The Banquet', combining with the Spirit is explained in terms of taking part in the Eucharist. Wine symbolizes the redeeming blood of Christ, which 'becomes a wing at last' (l. 42). The effect is clear:

⁷⁵ Matthew 3. 16 (KJV).

⁷⁶ *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, ed. by Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, 2nd edn, trans. by John Buchanan-Brown (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 393.

⁷⁷ Romans 8. 11 (KJV).

For with it alone I flie
To the skie:
Where I wipe mine eyes, and see
What I seek, for what I sue;
Him I view,
Who hath done so much for me. (ll. 43-48)

‘Easter’ further describes the nature of the combined effort as an accompaniment of three parts:

Pleasant and long:

Or, since all musick is but three parts vied
And multiplied,
O let thy blessed Spirit bear a part,
And make up our defects with his sweet art. (ll. 13-18)

Alone, the poet's flight is impeded, as a bird's with only one functioning wing would be – halting, or indeed impossible. The poet's pairing with the Spirit is not the only possibility in trying to reach towards heaven once lost, however. The Greek myth of the flight of Icarus is proverbial of escaping one's limitations (the labyrinth) through artifice and invention (constructed wings). The self-made wings melted too close to the sun, plunging Icarus to his death.

The hubris of Babel

The question of the poet's reaching toward heaven on his own accord was indeed not an alien thought to Herbert. In 'The Flower' the metaphor of flying is replaced by growth of a flower, while the object – reaching towards heaven – is the same:

Many a spring I shoot up fair,
 Offring at heav'n, growing and groning thither:
 Nor doth my flower
 Want a spring-showre,
 My sinnes and I joining together. (ll. 24-28)

Here, the poet has joined not with the Spirit, but with his own sinful nature – a notion, which carries a strong allusion to the biblical story of the tower of Babel, where Man opts to reach heaven through purely human effort, denying his dependence on God. In ‘Sinnes round’ Herbert makes the link between Babel and the hubris of sin explicit: ‘And so my sinnes ascend three stories high, | As Babel grew, before there were dissensions’ (ll. 14-15). As the God of Scripture did at Babel, the God that acts within Herbert’s verse cuts in and effectively checks human pride:

But while I grow in a straight line,
Still upwards bent, as if heav'n were mine own,
Thy anger comes, and I decline: ('The Flower', ll. 29-31)

Taylor explains the need of the Christian poet to 'recognize the divine source of his power. To forget God's share in human accomplishment, to assert that man creates rather than images reality, instances the worst kind of pride'.⁷⁸ The fate of the self-sufficient poet in 'The Flower' thus eloquently illustrates the interrelationship between the fear of God and creative license of the poet.

1.4 Dual authorship

'The Dedication' opens *The Temple* by presenting a curious paradox:

*Lord, my first fruits present themselves to thee;
Yet not mine neither: for from thee they came,
And must return. Accept of them and me, (ll. 1-3)*

The poems in *The Temple* are thus presented with two origins. They are '*my first fruits*' (l. 1) claiming the authorship to be the poet's, who of course, wrote them. Herbert soon checks himself, however: '*Yet not mine neither: for from thee they came, | And must return*' (ll. 2-3). As the fruits are presented to God for approval: '*Accept of them and me*' (l. 3), they cannot be seen fully as of God either, and thus Herbert's lyrics seem at the very outset to occupy an intermediate sphere between the two.

We may here draw an interesting parallel to Wolfgang Iser's concept of the work as he presents it in 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach'.⁷⁹ Here the work emerges in a virtual space between the reader and text. For our purposes, let us perceive God as the author, and Herbert as the reader. Genesis describes creation as the ultimate speech act: God spoke, and it was. The poems that are written by Herbert are then understood as readings of the divine text, of that which God has authored, or spoken. Within this world-view, Herbert exclaims in 'The Flower': 'Thy word is all, if we could spell' (l. 21).

⁷⁸ Taylor, p. 9.

⁷⁹ Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed by David Lodge, 2nd edn, rev. by Nigel Woods (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000), pp. 189-205.

Two spheres of authority

In 'Employment (I)' we recognise some of the agony that surfaces in 'The Flower':

If as a flowre doth spread and die,
Thou wouldst extend to me some good,
Before I were by frosts extremitie
Nipt in the bud; (ll. 1-4)

As the poem unfolds, we do not find the rebellious speaker of 'The Collar', however, but one that with greater maturity proceeds to differentiate his authority as poet from that of God's:

The sweetnesse and the praise were thine;
But the extension and the room,
Which in thy garland I should fill, were mine
At thy great doom.

For as thou dost impart thy grace,
The greater shall our glorie be.
The measure of our joyes is in this place,
The stuffe with thee. (ll. 5-12)

As so often is the case, Herbert's verse can be read as both commentary on life, as well as an analysis on writing verse. The garland in line 7 refers on one level to God's creation, of which Herbert is part. This is the sense in which the flower is used as a symbol of the poet in 'The Flower'. Further, we see the spiritual and material aspects of the flower embedded in the garland separated and juxtaposed: 'The sweetnesse and the praise' (l. 5) belong to God, 'the extension and the room' (l. 6) to Man.

Let us examine this division of reality a bit more closely. Apart from simply referring to the scent of the flowers, the 'sweetnesse' of the garland may be read somewhat more metaphorically. A possible reference to Herbert's use of the word is found in the Book of Psalms, where David exalts the word of God: 'How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!'.⁸⁰ As mentioned in the above, according to Scripture God created through his word: 'And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.'⁸¹ The Old Testament is echoed in the New: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.'⁸² The sweetness of creation may therefore be understood as the essence of the things created, or in Platonic terms, the *idea*

⁸⁰ Psalm 119. 103 (KJV).

⁸¹ Genesis 1. 3 (KJV).

⁸² John 1. 1-3 (KJV).

behind the material world. This reading is strengthened as Herbert again refers to the contrast between the finite Man and infinite God in lines 11-12, juxtaposing human ‘measure’ (l. 11) with divine ‘stuffe’ (l. 12).

Reading ‘thy garland’ (l. 7) in another, alternative sense – as poetry written in God’s honour – is justified as we read the poem in context of *The Temple* as a whole. The flower as a symbol refers not only to the poet, but to the poem throughout *The Temple* in more ways than one, as Herbert varies the use of ‘flower’, ‘posie’, and ‘pomander’, etc. in poems such as ‘Life’, ‘To all Angels and Saints’, and ‘The Odour’. In ‘A Wreath’ the garland stands clearly as a metaphor for the work of the poet: ‘A wreathed garland of deserved praise, | Of praise deserved, unto thee I give’ (ll. 1-2). Reading ‘Employment (I)’ in this light, the role of the poet in relation to God as creator becomes clear. The ‘sweetnesse’ of the poem – its beauty springing from divine revelation and truth – belongs to God. The material realization of the poem, on the other hand, is Herbert’s. The dual authorship of the poem thus parallels one of Christianity’s greatest mysteries – the incarnation. As Christ is both Son of God and Son of Man, so are we invited to view the nature of Herbert’s poetry – as both human and divine.

A ‘paradox of mutual containing’

In John Savoie’s ‘The Word Within: Predicating the Presence of God in George Herbert’s *The Temple*’, we are presented with an intriguing reading of the interplay of ‘presence’ between Herbert, Christ, Scripture, and the poem (*The Temple*). In his article, Savoie presents a ‘paradox of mutual containing’⁸³ in which Herbert is ‘hid’ in Christ, while Scripture is ‘hid’ within *The Temple* (p. 56). As Christ is the Word of God, he dwells in *The Temple*, as Herbert both quotes and alludes to Scripture. As dependent on him, Herbert dwells in Christ, in order to bear fruit. This interdependence of Man and God was introduced by Jesus, according to the gospel of John:

Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.⁸⁴

Savoie describes *The Temple* as ‘the Word within the word within the word’ (p. 57). Here, the ‘Word’ with the capital letter refers to Christ (cf. John 1), the second ‘word’ to Scripture in

⁸³ Savoie, p. 56. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁸⁴ John 15. 3-5 (KJV).

which he is present, while the third ‘word’ refers to the poem in which Scripture and therewith Christ is present.

Savoie’s discussion of ‘the fundamental relationships by which God himself becomes present in Herbert’s poetry’ (p. 57) springs from a close reading of ‘Coloss. 3.3.’ before turning to *The Temple* as a whole, and ‘The Sacrifice’ particularly. His discussion of the way Herbert takes control of the biblical material in his poetry is especially interesting. He explains: ‘For Herbert, Scripture can be neither created nor destroyed, though it may undergo changes of place and form’ (p. 58). Further, he quotes Chana Bloch: ‘Herbert does not “lose himself” in God’s words but, quite the contrary, finds the meaning of those words—and the hidden meaning of his life as well—when he rephrases them as a first person statement’ (p. 59).

The principle of incarnation

The poems in *The Temple*, then, seem to have a sort of dual or joint authorship, appearing between two poles. The artistic pole, linked here to creation, belongs to God. The aesthetic, pertaining to perception and appreciation of the beauty of that creation, is represented by Herbert. Alternatively, such poetry is dependent on two sources – human and divine.

The image of the fruit used as a metaphor for the poems in ‘The Dedication’ (l. 1) supports this reading. In the Old Testament we find references to two distinct kinds of fruit: ‘the fruit of thy womb, and the fruit of thy land.’⁸⁵ The fruit of the womb is in the New Testament closely linked to the Word incarnate, Christ born forth by Virgin Mary, who was impregnated by the Holy Spirit. He is called both Son of God and Son of Man.⁸⁶ In the New Testament, we find ‘fruit’ again as a metaphor in the parable of the sower: ‘The sower soweth the word. [...] on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit.’⁸⁷ The parable employs two constituent parts that are needed to bring forth fruit: the seed, which is the word of God, and the soil, which is the human heart. From the seed the fruit gets its matter, from the soil, its form. From the word of God the poem gets its truth, from the pen of the poet a physical representation. The poet that brings forth fruit may thus be seen as either soil that yields form to the seed according to divine prescript, or as a virgin overshadowed by God, giving human shape to the divine. Matter – or the Platonic *idea* – distinct from form is unintelligible for Man, who is himself part of creation. Scripture presents the incarnation as a

⁸⁵ Deuteronomy 7. 13 (KJV).

⁸⁶ John 1. 14; Luke 1. 31, 34-35; Matthew 18. 11 (KJV).

⁸⁷ Mark 4. 14, 20 (KJV).

way of explaining the infinite: ‘If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him.’⁸⁸ We may likewise draw a parallel between language and incarnation: ‘God is Infinite, but language is finite.’⁸⁹ As Christ is the infinite God explained in finite form – Word become flesh, so too (human) language conceptualises reality, and makes it intelligible. In Herbert’s poetry, the matter is divine, while the form is human.

1.5 Chapter conclusion

In this chapter I have sought to uncover the metaphysical foundation that lays the ground rules by which Herbert’s poet may thrive. It is essential that we understand how thoroughly Herbert’s Christian identity permeates his view of the poet’s authority over his verse.

The backdrop of ‘The Collar’ serves to explain the poet’s main challenge, which is to submit to his place in creation. He is not God. Neither, however, is he merely a servant. It is in his rightful position as child that he may share in all of his father’s household-stuff (heavenly truth), while remaining naturally dependent on him.

First of all, the poet in *The Temple* is not understood in capacity of originator. For Herbert, trusting in the capacities of Man alone involves the danger of both solipsism and idolatry. On a positive note, the existence of the ‘other’ presents the poet with endless opportunities to explore, in Macherey’s idiom, ‘an order external to himself’, which in Herbert case is properly identified as the Christian God.⁹⁰ Instead of creating something quite new of his own, the poet may reach towards this ‘other’ in admiration. It is this relational aspect that is referred to in ‘Jordan (II)’: *There is in love a sweetness readie penn’d: | Copie out onely that, and save expense* (ll. 17-18).

In order to grasp spiritual truths within the Christian paradigm of *The Temple*, the poet must be born again ‘of water and of the Spirit’.⁹¹ Pairing with the Spirit parallels the traditional idea of inspiration, by which the poet may rise to heights he could not possibly reach alone. He might, of course, attempt at those heights on his own, but such pride is in the context of *The Temple* effectively checked by the authority of Herbert’s God, indicating that the fear of the Lord and the poet’s poetic license are closely linked. However, also here the

⁸⁸ John 14. 7 (KJV).

⁸⁹ James K. A. Smith, *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation* (London: Routledge, 2002), first leaf (not paginated).

⁹⁰ Macherey, p. 67.

⁹¹ John 3. 5 (KJV).

reciprocity between the poet and God is evident, as one of the wings in 'Easter-wings' belongs to Man, the other to God.

The complementary roles of the poet and God are finally described in terms of a dual authorship, based on a reading of 'The Dedication' and 'Employment (I)'. This duality is based on the Christian idea that spiritual things are understood through the corporeal. Although the spiritual aspect precedes the corporeal, the notion of dual authorship does not focus on the aspect of hierarchy, but suggests a notion of interdependence between the two authors; the poet is dependent on God for divine revelation (truth), while God, on his side, is dependent on the poet (language) to make this truth legible to Man.

2. The Poet and the Poem

The question of authority discussed in chapter one lays a foundation for this second chapter, which turns our focus from the question of authority to examining more closely the nature of the poem in relation to the poet. The two are naturally linked in a system of cause and effect, but in case of Herbert, they are particularly closely intertwined. In this chapter I wish to substantiate this postulation.

Chapter overview

The first part of this chapter will set a conceptual framework for describing the nature of the poem in Herbert, springing from a close reading of ‘The Altar’. Here two levels of poetry are discerned, appertaining to the divine and human spheres of authority introduced in chapter one. The notion of the first ‘poem’ relates to the poet’s experience of the divine, understood as God’s work in him, and the poet’s subsequent reaction. The second poem springs from the first, making its effects manifest in language. This kind of poetry may best be characterized in Herbert’s own idiom as ‘The soul in paraphrase’ (‘Prayer (I)’, l. 3). The prominent formal features of ‘The Altar’ serve further to highlight the nature of poetry in this second sense as physical representation – or artefact. The metaphor of the temple figured in the very title of *The Temple* is helpful in explaining the nature of the poetry on both these levels, in its abstract quality as well as its concrete representation.

Before examining the poem more closely as both an act and an artefact, the second part of this chapter will consider the existential character of Herbert’s verse in some more detail. We find it in clear focus in ‘The Quidditie’, where the poet proclaims his verse to be ‘that which while I use | I am with thee’ (ll. 11-12).

The third part of this chapter will discuss the poem as an act, pertaining to the sense in which it is seen as God’s work in the poet. Understanding the poem as an act is central to the poetics of *The Temple*, as the poems evidently spring from an inner experience and constitute a response or reaction. The non-linguistic longing that is the poem behind the poem is signified in terms of ‘sighs’ and ‘grones’ that figure frequently throughout *The Temple*. Although involving language, we may also consider the notion of prayer and praise as

descriptive of the nature of Herbert's verse in this abstract sense. The abstract poem thus clothed in language provides the link to the poem in the second sense, as words on paper.

The fourth part of this chapter will turn our attention back to the poem as a physical artefact. As the poem as an act may only be truly discerned by God, who 'the LORD searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts',⁹² the poem as an artefact is accessible to Everyman, as long as he speaks the language. With Man as his audience, Herbert characterises his poetry in 'Perirrhanterium' as a 'bait of pleasure' intended to rhyme the reader 'to good' (l. 4).

Note on 'act' and 'artefact'

The *OED* defines 'act' as a 'thing done; a deed, a performance', and further as something 'done as the result, practical outcome, or external manifestation of any state, and, whence the state may be inferred'.⁹³ This is the sense in which the word is used in the following discussion. The notion of playing a part, or pretence, also implied by the word is not intended. On the contrary, the aspect of sincerity is central to Herbert's poetics. In *The Temple* Herbert explores both the internal state of the poet as well as its external manifestation – the longing and the doing. Both these aspects involve the poet's person, and are in the following discussion understood as acts.

'Artefact' on the other hand, refers to 'anything made by human art and workmanship'.⁹⁴ The poem as artefact may also be understood in terms of embodiment, that in which an abstract idea, the poem as act (experience or feeling), is actualized or concretely expressed. In this sense the poems are seen as physical representations of what they signify, no longer an inherent part of the poets experience, although springing from it.

2.1 Raising an altar, building a temple

'The Altar' presents an intriguing example that features the poem at once as both an act and an artefact. As the visual features of the poem will prove to be central to our analysis, I will provide it here in full, again following the typography of Hutchinson's *Works*.

⁹² 1 Chronicles 28. 9 (KJV).

⁹³ *OED*, 'act *n.*' 1. a. and b.

⁹⁴ *OED*, 'artefact *n.* and *a.*' A.

The Altar.

A broken A L T A R, Lord, thy servant reares,
Made of a heart, and cemented with teares:
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workmans tool hath touch'd the same.

A H E A R T alone
Is such a stone ,
As nothing but
Thy pow'r doth cut.
Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praise thy Name:

That, if I chance to hold my peace,
These stones to praise thee may not cease.
O let thy blessed S A C R I F I C E be mine,
And sanctifie this A L T A R to be thine.⁹⁵

Through a close reading of 'The Altar' we find that a subtle shift in focus occurs between lines 8 and 9, creating perfect symmetry. While lines 1-8 present the idea of an altar 'Made of a heart' (l. 2), lines 9-16 present the poem itself as the altar, referring to 'this frame' (l. 11), commenting on the composition itself. The juxtaposition of the heart as poem vs. the poem on paper is clear from the way the verb 'frame' (l. 3) is contrasted with the noun 'this frame' (l. 11), as well as the singular 'stone' (l. 6) with 'These stones' (l. 14), occurring on each side of the dividing line at the middle. In line 6 the stone stands as a metaphor for the poet's heart, which broken parts are framed, i.e. shaped to a certain purpose, by God. 'These stones' on the other hand, refer to the words that make up the lines that shape 'this frame' – the poem, which Herbert shaped to his purpose on paper.

The image of the altar pertaining both to the poet ('heart') and the poem ('this frame') keeps with the notion of dual authorship discussed in chapter one. In 'The Altar' God is the author of the first 'poem', shaping the poet's heart. In this sense, the poet *is* the poem. The determiners in '*this* frame' (l. 11, my italics) and '*These* stones' (l. 14, my italics), on the other hand, lead us to consider the referent here being rather more material than the metaphorical 'HEART' (l. 5). The carefully framed appearance of the composition in the form of an altar strengthens this reading, as it claims attention to the poem's physical appearance, and not merely its linguistic content. The speaker thus presents the poem itself as an artefact – a thing that signifies as such: 'That, if I chance to hold my peace, | These stones to praise thee

⁹⁵ *Works*, p. 26.

may not cease' (ll. 13-14). The poem in this second sense, as words on paper, springs from the first act of 'writing' – God's work in Man. Analysing 'The Altar', and Herbert's poetry in general, it is therefore essential to gain an understanding of the first 'poem' to fully appreciate the second.

The first poem of 'The Altar'

The amalgamated imagery of the stone altar and the heart form a curious hybrid of biblical images. Rearing an altar of stone, the blocks of which no man has sculpted, bears reference to Exodus: 'And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it.'⁹⁶ The uncarved stone is in its natural state, formed only in the first act of creation, and stands in contrast to the idol images carved from wood and stone, which are prohibited by law: 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.'⁹⁷ The heart, on the other hand, symbolizes in scriptural tradition 'the inner personality and its emotional life, and was the seat of wisdom and understanding'.⁹⁸ As such, it is 'more closely linked to the spirit than to the soul'.⁹⁹ The image of the stony heart bears likeness to Ezekiel: 'A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.'¹⁰⁰ Another clear reference of the 'broken ALTAR' (l. 1) is found in the Psalms: 'The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.'¹⁰¹

In order to be consistent with the metaphor of the altar, which in the Old Testament was made of stone, Herbert overlooks the significance of God exchanging the stony heart with one of flesh. In 'The Altar' the heart is simply 'cut' (l. 8) by God. Although Herbert thus departs from his Scriptural source, the significance of God's hand in forming the heart is expressed by the active verb 'frame' (l. 3), which means 'to shape, direct [something] to a certain purpose, [...] to shape the action, faculties, or inclinations of [someone]', or even 'to train' or 'discipline'.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ Exodus 20. 25 (KJV).

⁹⁷ Exodus 20. 3-4 (KJV).

⁹⁸ *Symbols*, p. 481.

⁹⁹ *Symbols*, p. 481.

¹⁰⁰ Ezekiel 36. 26 (KJV).

¹⁰¹ Psalm 51. 17 (KJV).

¹⁰² *OED*, 'frame, v.' 5. c.

In context of *The Temple* entire, and illustrated among other poems in ‘Love unknown’, the method by which the poet’s heart is formed and made ‘tender’ (l. 70) is through affliction:

[...] I saw a large
And spacious fornace flaming, and thereon
A boyling caldron, round about whose verge
Was in great letters set *AFFLICTION*.
The greatnesse shew’d the owner. So I went
To fetch a sacrifice out of my fold,
Thinking with that, which I did thus present,
To warm his love, which I did fear grew cold.
But as my heart did tender it, the man,
Who was to take it from me, slipt his hand,
And threw my heart into the scalding pan;
My heart, that brought it (do you understand?)
The offerers heart. *Your heart was hard, I fear.* (ll. 25-37)

The verb ‘tender’ (l. 33) is of course different from the adjective ‘tender’ (l. 70), but there is, as Herbert’s use of homonyms highlights, a link between the two. The first translates as ‘to offer or present formally for acceptance’,¹⁰³ the second to ‘susceptible to moral or spiritual influence’.¹⁰⁴ The poet ‘went | To fetch a sacrifice out of my fold’ (ll. 29-30), tendering – offering – this as a sacrifice. According to Scripture, however, ‘to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams’.¹⁰⁵ Instead of the material offering, it was the offerer’s heart that needed to be made tender, a distinction made clear by juxtaposing the different uses of the morphologically identical, although semantically and grammatically different words.

Affliction was a subject of great concern to Herbert, inspiring no less than five individual poems bearing the same title, spread throughout the volume of *The Temple*. Among the lot ‘Affliction IV’ offers a forceful description of how affliction reforms the Christian poet’s heart. His conscience described as ‘a case of knives’ (l. 7), we meet not with the self-assured speaker of ‘The Collar’, but one who suffers acutely as he feels out of place both in ‘this world and that of grace’ (l. 6). The world as Christian metaphor represents Man’s sinful nature.¹⁰⁶ Grace, on the other hand, represents the way of salvation.¹⁰⁷ Occupying an intermediate sphere, the poet is distressed. All his ‘attendants’ (l. 13) at strife, he is driven to

¹⁰³ *OED*, ‘tender, v.’¹

¹⁰⁴ *OED*, ‘tender, a. (adv.) and n.’³ IV. 11. a.

¹⁰⁵ 1 Samuel 15, 22 (KJV).

¹⁰⁶ ‘For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world’ 1 John 2. 16 (KJV).

¹⁰⁷ ‘For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast’ Ephesians 2. 8-9 (KJV).

seek absolution. What his specific sin may have been is not of interest, but the way he has to go from self-assertiveness to dependency, and from pride to humility, is central. The last two stanzas show the poet both seeking help from, and offering his devotion to one greater than he:

Oh help, my God! let not their plot
Kill them and me,
And also thee,
Who art my life: dissolve the knot,
As the sunne scatters by his light
All the rebellions of the night.

Then shall those powers, which work for grief,
Enter thy pay,
And day by day
Labour thy praise, and my relief;
With care and courage building me,
Till I reach heav'n, and much more, thee. (ll. 19-30)

In the penultimate stanza, Herbert employs his favourite pun: 'sunne' (l. 23) – Son. As the rising sun puts an end to night, so the risen Christ signifies victory over sin, and the poet may soar with the Spirit 'Till I reach heav'n, and much more, thee' (l. 30).

We find the same underlying pattern in 'Easter-wings', where the poet first describes how his sinful nature wears him down, the distress he experiences ultimately leading him to turn to God for help:

And still with sicknesses and shame
Thou didst so punish sinne,
That I became
Most thinne.
With thee
Let me combine
And feel this day thy victorie: (ll. 12-18)

The movement in this second stanza of 'Easter-wings' draws heavily on Paul's letter to Romans, where the Apostle explains: 'For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.'¹⁰⁸ As affliction leads to repentance, which again leads to salvation, we find that the final line of 'Easter-wings' captures both the means and end of God's way of perfecting his verse (the poet's heart): 'Affliction shall advance the flight in me' (l. 20).

¹⁰⁸ Romans 6. 23 (KJV).

The movement in both ‘Affliction (IV)’ and ‘Easter-wings’ traces the way from ‘this world’ to ‘that of grace’, outlined in Ephesians chapter two, which portrays the Christian as God’s workmanship (v. 10):

And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world [...] For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.¹⁰⁹

Thus far we have, however, only considered God’s role in bringing forth the poem, which is a holy life. However, as the passage from Ephesians concludes, Man is created anew with a purpose: ‘unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them’ (v. 10).

In being the poem, the poet must play an active part. The speaker in ‘The Altar’ claims an active role as he actually ‘reares’ (l. 1) the altar, only the ‘parts’ (l. 3) of which have been framed by God. The image of building an altar is compellingly physical, evocative of a vigorous builder. Rearing an altar of stone would have been laborious, requiring strength and causing perspiration. Equivalently, affliction produces the tears of repentance that serve for cement (l. 2), signalling intense participation by the poet in forming the poem, which is the heart’s sacrifice of praise to God. In ‘Love (II)’ Herbert again employs the image of the heart in connection with an altar, and poetry as sacrifice:

Then shall our hearts pant thee; then shall our brain
All her invention on thine Altar lay,
And there in hymnes send back thy fire again: (ll. 6-8)

We may replace ‘invention’ (l. 7) with poetry, in line with Herbert’s metaphor in Sonnet (I): ‘Why are not *Sonnets* made of thee? and layes | Upon thine Altar burnt?’ (ll. 5-6). In ‘Love (II)’ the heart pants with desire towards God, producing the breath necessary to kindle the fire that sends the sacrifice up in smoke towards heaven. Or rather, it kindles a fervour, which turns human action into praise and may ‘in hymnes send back thy fire again’ (l. 8). We may also read ‘pant thee’ (l. 6) in the sense of ‘breath thee’, describing an intimate relationship between the poet and his source of inspiration – the Holy Spirit, with reference to chapter one.

¹⁰⁹ Ephesians 2. 1-2, 8-10 (KJV).

Essentially, an altar ‘symbolizes the time and place where a person becomes holy or performs something holy’.¹¹⁰ The poem underlying ‘The Altar’ may accordingly be identified as an act of sanctification through suffering and surrender.

The second poem of ‘The Altar’

The nature of the second poem in ‘The Altar’ may be understood in light of the concept of incarnation discussed in chapter one, as two authors are ultimately at work in writing the poem. The first poet – God – creates the matter of the poem, as he works on the poet’s heart. The second poet – Herbert – gives intelligible form to the matter, as he clothes the experience in language. In other words, the second poem in ‘The Altar’ springs out of the first as Herbert transcribes his heart – the experience of his inner man – into words on paper:

Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praise thy Name: (ll. 9-12)

Recording the response of his inner man in verse, Herbert writes a testament of a heart in devotion, which is *The Temple*. Helen Vendler is likely to agree, as she also has pointed out: ‘An expressive theory of poetry suits *The Temple* best: no matter how exquisitely written a poem by Herbert is in its final form, it seems usually to have begun in experience, and aims at recreating or recalling that experience’.¹¹¹

In ‘Prayer (I)’ Herbert describes devotion as ‘The soul in paraphrase’ (l. 3). Further endorsing this view, he makes the link between feeling and concrete representation explicit in ‘The Temper (I)’:

How should I praise thee, Lord! how should my rymes
Gladly engrave thy love in steel,
If what my soul doth feel sometimes,
My soul might ever feel! (ll. 1-4)

The fluidity of feeling is here effectively contrasted with the solidity of verse.

The poet is not yet ‘Fast in thy Paradise’ (‘The Flower’, l. 23), where all is ‘past changing’ (l. 22). On this side of death, the poet aches ‘Betwixt this world and that of grace’ (‘Affliction (IV)’, l. 6). In ‘The Temper (I)’ he finds himself alternately in both:

¹¹⁰ *Symbols*, p. 18.

¹¹¹ Vendler, p. 5.

Although there were some fourtie heav'ns, or more,
Sometimes I peere above them all;
Sometimes I hardly reach a score,
Sometimes to hell I fall. (ll. 5-8)

The stanza reflects a similar notion in 'The Flower':

These are thy wonders, Lord of power,
Killing and quickning, bringing down to hell
And up to heaven in an houre;
Making a chiming of a passing-bell.
We say amisse,
This or that is:
Thy word is all, if we could spell. (ll. 15-21)

His inadequacy to capture the immensity of his subject makes the poet in 'The Temper (I)' cry out: 'O rack me not to such a vast extent; | Those distances belong to thee:' (ll. 9-10) and more: 'Will great God measure with a wretch? | Shall he thy stature spell?' (ll. 15-16).

The difficulty the poet identifies is his limited scope. How can anyone capture the infinite God in finite language? At any given time, he may experience some part of the whole – either hell or heaven – not an intimate knowledge of both at the same time, illustrated by the passages from both 'The Temper (I)' and 'The Flower' above. To say 'This or that is' ('The Flower', l. 20) will never capture the whole truth. However, the poet in 'The Temper (I)' decides to trust God knows what he is doing:

Yet take thy way; for sure thy way is best:
Stretch or contract me, thy poore debter:
This is but tuning of my breast,
To make the musick better. (ll. 21-24)

The poet soon comes to terms with his part in transcribing heavenly truth. While it is God's power that creates and upholds everything, it is the poet's place to trust him:

Whether I flie with angels, fall with dust,
Thy hands made both, and I am there:
Thy power and love, my love and trust
Make one place ev'ry where. (ll. 25-28)

The last line turns suddenly to show the potential in Man, not inherent in him, but in the context of him trusting God. Although he occupies just 'one place', he may somehow stretch 'ev'ry where' (l. 28). A particular line of verse may after all mirror the universality of human experience.

The import of the poem is ultimately intangible, portraying the heart in worship. Written down, it takes on a body of words, carefully arranged to convey meaning. As the first poem in 'The Altar' may be understood as an act, this second one may be perceived as an artefact. Even more than the fact that Herbert gives words to his heart's devotion, the poem of 'The Altar' stands now forth with a carefully constructed body of words, giving it a markedly physical presence. As a pattern poem, it presents a physical artefact that signifies.

In the tradition of the pattern poem, 'the typographical shape of the words on the page resembles or evokes a concrete object or a geometrical form. In successful pattern poems the typography adds significantly to the meaning of the poem as a whole'.¹¹² More precisely, Bart Westerweel writes, 'the relation between pattern and poem [is] that of metaphor'.¹¹³ In 'The Altar', Herbert effectively actualises the poem's verbal content through a visual image. In 'Easter-wings' the metaphor of flight, which permeates the poem's imagery, is successfully highlighted through the form of the two stanzas forming two pairs of wings. The plot of the poem, that follows the waning and waxing of Man's fortune – his Fall and Salvation – is at the same time compellingly visualized through the shortening and extending lines.

Another symbolic mode of thinking that flourished in the Renaissance, and which influenced Herbert was the tradition of the emblem.¹¹⁴ An emblem is a 'picture of an object (or the object itself) serving as a symbolical representation of an abstract quality'.¹¹⁵ In the above I identified in 'The Altar' a shift in focus between lines 8 and 9, the first part referring to the poet's heart, the second to the poem itself. If you were to cut out the poem tracing its outline on the page and then fold it in half between lines 8 and 9, the two halves would be identical in shape, mirroring each other. It is tempting to read thematic significance into the symmetrical structure so carefully constructed by Herbert. The two halves – the heart framed by God, and the poem framed by Herbert mirror each other, and are both necessary to form a whole.

The shape of the poem read as an emblem, 'The Altar' anticipates the twentieth century movement of 'concrete poetry' in which 'the common feature is the use of a radically reduced language, typed or printed in such a way as to force the visible text on the reader's attention as a physical object and not simply as a transparent carrier of its meanings'.¹¹⁶ The

¹¹² Bart Westerweel, *Patterns and Patterning: A Study of Four Poems by George Herbert*, New Series: Costerus, XLI (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1984), p. 1.

¹¹³ Westerweel, p. 6.

¹¹⁴ Westerweel, p. 6.

¹¹⁵ *OED*, 'emblem *n.*' 3. a.

¹¹⁶ Abrams, p. 45.

linguistic portion of ‘The Altar’, or that of Herbert’s poetry in general, is far from reduced, but in line with the tradition of concrete poetry the form of ‘The Altar’ may be argued to play a more important role than merely serving as symbol. In a study of Herbert’s pattern poems, Bart Westerweel maintains that ‘for Herbert, too, “a truth condensed into a visual image was somehow nearer the realm of absolute truth than one explained in words”’.¹¹⁷ Within a Pythagorean system, Dick Higgins explains:

A word stood not for the thing it denoted but for the idea underlying it, and was thus a symbol of pure form. [...] A similar sacred power was attributed to letters, which were not seen as mechanical components of the written word, but as essential and autonomous instruments expressing the process underlying them, analogous therefore to numbers and proportions. The process of forming words became, then, a very sacred one indeed, part of the divine game of realizing things out of their underlying numbers or letters.¹¹⁸

In his discussion of Herbert’s pattern poems, Westerweel makes yet another interesting observation:

Herbert’s pattern poems are dynamic interactions between the poet/priest and his God; their classical counterparts are static monologues. Because Herbert adheres to the shape and idiom of the classical examples, the superiority of the Christian faith as a source for poetry stands out even more strikingly than it would otherwise have done.¹¹⁹

The dynamic interaction in ‘The Altar’ involves two authors, and two levels of poetry, as discussed above. Herbert, the poet, plays a part in each, although not having sole authority over either of the poems. The first necessitates a divine influence to which he merely reacts, and thus becomes – or enacts – the poem. The second is severed from him the moment it is written down, and finds in the reader yet another author, who must make sense of the words without the inner experience of the poet leading him to a ‘correct’ reading. This is why Herbert writes in ‘The Dedication’, calling for the Holy Spirit: ‘*Turn their eyes hither, who shall make a gain: | Theirs, who shall hurt themselves or me, refrain*’ (ll. 5-6), exhibiting an awareness on Herbert’s part of reader reception.

¹¹⁷ Westerweel, p. 33. (The embedded quotation is from: E. H. Gombrich, ‘Icones Symbolicae: The Visual Image in Neo-Platonic Thought’, *JWCI*, 11 (1948), pp. 163-188).

¹¹⁸ Dick Higgins, *George Herbert’s Pattern Poems: In Their Tradition* (West Glover: Unpublished Editions, 1977), p. 8. The phrase ‘pure form’ is employed in Higgins’s text in the sense in which I have used ‘matter’.

¹¹⁹ Westerweel, p. 76.

The metaphor of the temple

Symbolically, an altar ‘reproduces on a small scale the entire temple’.¹²⁰ This seems to be the case not only metaphorically, but quite literally, when it comes to ‘The Altar’ in relation to *The Temple* as a whole. As already mentioned, the scriptural references inherent in ‘The Altar’, as well as its poetic metaphors carry a strong allusion to the altar built by the Israelites:

Therefore it shall be when ye be gone over Jordan, that ye shall set up these stones, which I command you this day, in mount Ebal, and thou shalt plaister them with plaister. And there shalt thou build an altar unto the LORD thy God, an altar of stones: thou shalt not lift up any iron tool upon them. Thou shalt build the altar of the LORD thy God of whole stones: and thou shalt offer burnt offerings thereon unto the LORD thy God: And thou shalt offer peace offerings, and shalt eat there, and rejoice before the LORD thy God.¹²¹

What is striking is how the passage above pertains not only to ‘The Altar’, but to the structure of ‘The Church’, which constitutes the main part of *The Temple*. As the very first poem in ‘The Church’, Herbert rears ‘The Altar’ of his stony heart, cut by God and plastered with tears. He then proceeds to offer both burnt offering and peace offering – poetry of both acute affliction and trustful devotion – before he at last in ‘Love (III)’, the very last poem of ‘The Church’, is invited to ‘sit and eat’ (l. 18), with unmistakable reference to the passage above: ‘thou [...] shalt eat there, and rejoice before the LORD thy God’ (v. 7).

What is more, the two-fold nature of the poem in ‘The Altar’ is echoed in the metaphor of the temple that characterises the volume of poetry as such through its prominent placement in the title: *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations*. A temple is generally regarded as an ‘edifice or place regarded primarily as the dwelling-place or ‘house’ of a deity or deities; hence, an edifice devoted to divine worship’, or figuratively, any ‘place regarded as occupied by the divine presence; *spec.* the person or body of a Christian’.¹²² The Apostle writes: ‘What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s.’¹²³ The Scripture, which thus explains the metaphor, comments on both being and doing – the Christian is a temple, and he ought therefore to glorify God in body and in spirit. Although somewhat difficult to grasp, the idea of one’s person signifying praise is well rooted in Christian thinking: ‘Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as

¹²⁰ *Symbols*, p. 18.

¹²¹ Deuteronomy 27. 4-7 (KJV).

¹²² *OED*, ‘temple, *n.*’ 1. 1. and 3.

¹²³ 1 Corinthians 6. 19-20 (KJV).

living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship’.¹²⁴ The same way that the body of a Christian may glorify God, so may perceivably a body of poetry, such as *The Temple*.

In ‘Sion’ Herbert explores the metaphor of the temple on three levels. The first temple the poem refers to, is the Old Testament temple, built under King Solomon; a building in a purely material sense. According to Scripture, it was built according to divine blueprint:

Take heed now; for the LORD hath chosen thee to build an house for the sanctuary: be strong, and do it. Then David gave to Solomon his son the pattern of [...] all that he had by the spirit, of the courts of the house of the LORD [followed by a detailed list.] All this, said David, the LORD made me understand in writing by his hand upon me, even all the works of this pattern.¹²⁵

The execution, on the other hand, was purely by human effort:

But who is able to build him an house, seeing the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain him? who am I then, that I should build him an house, save only to burn sacrifice before him? Send me now therefore a man cunning to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in iron, and in purple, and crimson, and blue, and that can skill to grave with the cunning men that are with me in Judah and in Jerusalem, whom David my father did provide. Send me also cedar trees, fir trees, and algum trees, out of Lebanon: for I know that thy servants can skill to cut timber in Lebanon.¹²⁶

The result stood as a magnificent monument, bearing witness to Him that would dwell in it. In ‘Sion’ Herbert lauds its ornamental finish:

Lord, with what glorie wast thou serv’d of old,
When Solomons temple stood and flourished!
Where most things were of purest gold;
The wood was all embellished
With flowers and carvings, mysticall and rare:
All show’d the builders, crav’d the seeers [sic!] care. (ll. 1-6)

In ‘Man’ Herbert describes another building:

My God, I heard this day,
That none doth build a stately habitation,
But he that means to dwell therein.
What house more stately hath there been,
Or can be, then is Man? to whose creation
All things are in decay. (ll. 1-6)

¹²⁴ Romans 12. 1 (NIV). The KJV reads ‘[...] which is your reasonable service’. The sense in which ‘service’ is used here is recorded by the *OED*, ‘service, *n.*’ III. 13. as ‘worship’. This sense of the word being more readily available for the modern reader in the NIV, I have chosen to quote it here by way of exception.

¹²⁵ I Chronicles 28. 10-19 (KJV).

¹²⁶ II Chronicles 2. 6-8 (KJV).

This is this temple that provides the reference for Paul's metaphor of the temple in his letter to the Corinthians. In 'Sion' Herbert makes a clear distinction between the temple of Solomon and the Christian as temple for the Spirit, while also drawing a parallel between them. He dismisses the first: 'Yet all this glorie, all this pomp and state | Did not affect thee much, was not thy aim' (ll. 7-8). He then turns to describe the second temple, Man, the reference of the temple now far more abstract than at first: 'And now thy Architecture meets with sinne; | For all thy frame and fabrick is within' (ll. 11-12). This second temple in 'Sion' is the first poem of 'The Altar', where God works on the heart:

There thou art struggling with a peevish heart,
Which sometimes crosseth thee, thou sometimes it:
The fight is hard on either part. (ll. 13-15)

The metaphor of the temple is inescapably linked to a notion of sacrifice. In stead of the incense burnt on the altar of the first temple, it is the heart's sacrifice of praise which now in this second temple may 'grow | To some degree of spicinesse to thee!' ('The Odour', ll. 14-15). In 'Sion' Herbert comments on the difference: 'All Solomons sea of brasse and world of stone | Is not so deare to thee as one good grone' (ll. 17-18). It is the immaterial nature of the groan that makes it superior, as it is not bound by the material world:

And truly brasse and stones are heavie things,
Tombes for the dead, not temples fit for thee:
But grones are quick, and full of wings,
And all their motions upward be;
And ever as they mount, like larks they sing;
The note is sad, yet musick for a King. (ll. 19-24)

The groan is lived, and felt. Moreover, it is articulated. It is this music of the soul in longing that Herbert has written down, and which as words on paper constitutes another physical 'building' in the form of *The Temple*.

2.2 'The Quidditie'

Before we move on to discuss the poem as act and artefact more closely, let us pause to examine 'The Quidditie', a poem in which Herbert addresses the question of the nature of his poetry directly. It is vital that we read the poem in light of its title – not as a comment on poetry in general terms, but as an attempt to arrive at the very core of its nature. The *OED* defines 'quiddity' as the 'inherent nature or essence of a person or thing; what a thing or

person is; that which distinguishes a person or thing from others'.¹²⁷ In Scholastic philosophy, quiddity is opposed to hæcceity, which points to 'the quality implied in the use of *this*, as *this man*; [or *this poem*] 'thisness'; 'hereness and nowness'; that quality or mode of being in virtue of which a thing is or becomes a definite individual'.¹²⁸ 'Quiddity', then, is synonymous of 'matter', while 'hæcceity' denotes the same as 'form'. The title of 'The Quidditie', then, leads us to consider the poem as a reflection on the nature of the poem, closely related to the notion of the first poem of 'The Altar'.

In search of the very essence of his verse, that which lies behind the individual poem, the speaker of 'The Quidditie' dismisses a range of metaphors that at first glance would seem to fit quite nicely. Ann Pasternak Slater notes in her edition of Herbert, that the title 'is used punningly: its proper sense is the essence of a thing, but it was extended to mean a quibbling, oversubtle distinction'.¹²⁹ She identifies the latter meaning persistent 'through all the negations of the first ten lines; the true essence of a verse is described in the last two lines'.¹³⁰ In order to work his way to the core, Herbert demonstratively peels off the metaphors 'Decking the sense' ('Jordan (II)', l. 6). Let us look at a couple of the metaphors Herbert finds inadequate:

My God, a verse is not a crown,
No point of honour, or gay suit,
No hawk, or banquet, or renown,
Nor a good sword, nor yet a lute: (ll. 1-4)

To start off with, the speaker of 'The Quidditie' declares without hesitation that his 'verse is not a crown' (l. 1). The crown has traditionally been 'depicted in various shapes and forms on the brows of victorious generals, of geniuses, the learned, poets, or in allegories of victory, war, peace, learning, oratory, philosophy, theology, astrology, fortune, virtue, wisdom and honour'.¹³¹ In contrast, we have seen the self-possessed speaker of 'The Collar' cry out indignantly:

Is the yeare onely lost to me?
Have I no bayes to crown it?
No flowers, no garlands gay? all blasted?
All wasted? (ll. 13-16)

¹²⁷ *OED*, 'quiddity, *n.*' 1. a.

¹²⁸ *OED*, 'hæcceity'

¹²⁹ *George Herbert: The Complete English Works*, ed. by Ann Pasternak Slater (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), p. 422.

¹³⁰ Slater, p. 422.

¹³¹ *Symbols*, pp. 265-266.

A crown of bay leaves was traditionally ‘woven into a wreath or garland to reward a conqueror or poet’.¹³² The fame and repute thus symbolized, the ‘renown’ (l. 3) attained by excelling in verse, is renounced by the more sober speaker of ‘The Quidditie’. The poetry of *The Temple* is ‘No point of honour’ (l. 2), as his verse is not a crown; it is no ‘outward sign of success’.¹³³

Neither is his verse a ‘gay suit’ (l. 2). The quip is arguably directed at the art of poetry as ‘the gay science’.¹³⁴ The phrase is recorded by the *OED* to have first occurred in the late seventeenth century, but the concept has been treated by Herbert in general, which legitimizes the link. In ‘Love (I)’ he describes secular love poetry in depreciative terms as a game, echoing the notion of poetry as a ‘gay suit’:

Wit fancies beautie, beautie raiseth wit:
The world is theirs; they two play out the game,
Thou standing by: and though thy glorious name
Wrought our deliverance from th’ infernall pit,
Who sings thy praise? onely a skarf or glove
Doth warm our hands, and make them write of love. (ll. 9-14)

As earlier in connection with ‘The Collar’, ‘suit’ may be read in the sense of clothing (or metaphorically: rhetoric), or a pursuit (wit and beauty playing out the game). In both cases, the contrast between the sober speaker of ‘The Quidditie’ and the passionate speaker of ‘The Collar’ is clear. In ‘The Collar’, the speaker laments his lot: ‘Shall I be still in suit?’ (l. 6), claiming the right to use his life and lines as he sees fit, acknowledging ‘no law but wit’.¹³⁵ The egotistical poet’s attitude leaves ‘Thou [God] standing by’ (‘Love (I)’, l. 11), an attitude Herbert ultimately repels.

In ‘The Quidditie’ Herbert goes on to list and subsequently dismiss both familiar and obscure metaphors in an effort to look past what a verse may seem to the casual observer:

It cannot vault, or dance, or play;
It never was in *France* or *Spain*;
Nor can it entertain the day
With my great stable or domain:

It is no office, art, or news,
Nor the Exchange, or busie Hall; (ll. 5-10)

¹³² *OED*, ‘bay, *n.*’ 3.

¹³³ *Symbols*, p. 265.

¹³⁴ *OED*, ‘gay, *adj.*, *adv.*, and *n.*’ A. 3. c.

¹³⁵ Sidney, p. 26.

At last he turns his argument from negation to a positive statement: ‘But it is that which while I use | I am with thee, and *most take all*’ (ll. 11-12). The final couplet reveals the poem as a tool ‘that which while I *use*’ (l. 11, my italics). If we look more closely, we may refine our understanding perhaps more correctly of the poem as a state or a condition – an act: ‘that which *while* I use | I *am*’ (ll. 11-12, my italics). The poem happens in the act of writing, and constitutes essentially a relationship: ‘that which while I use | I am *with thee*’ (ll. 11-12, my italics).

We must not overlook the enigmatic last half of the final line: ‘and *most take all*’ (l. 12). In a note to ‘The Quidditie’ F. P. Wilson provides valuable insight into how we may interpret Herbert’s ending: ‘The idea that the poet is vague should be dismissed, for this poet is never vague; and if the last line is obscure, Time is to blame for the obscurity, not Herbert’.¹³⁶ He identifies ‘most take all’ as ‘a proverb rarely met with in print’, recorded, however, in Ray’s *Proverbs* (1678) (pp. 398-399). Wilson proceeds to explaining the proverb, while providing a concise analysis of the poem as a whole:

‘Most’ is used in the sense of ‘the most powerful’ (*O.E.D.*, A, 4), and the meaning is similar to that of the proverb to which Herbert refers in ‘Providence’, l. 52: ‘The great (fish) prey on (eat up) the little’. The poem is called ‘The Quidditie’ because in it the poet distinguishes the essence or quiddity of the spiritual life from the accidents of the world. As he writes his verses, dedicated not to the mundane activities, pleasures, and accomplishments enumerated in the poem but to the service of God, the poet is with God, and God the all-powerful takes complete possession of him (‘*Most take all*’). (p. 399)

Wilson holds that the poet ‘distinguishes the essence or quiddity of the spiritual life from the accidents of the world’ (p. 399), a proposition that coincides with the two spheres of authority discussed in chapter one. In this light, the essence or quiddity of the poem lies in its spiritual truth, authored by God, while the numerous worldly concepts of the poem listed in ‘The Quidditie’ are dismissed as mere ‘accidents of the world’ (p. 399). The poem as a ‘point of honour’ (l. 2) is at most a secondary characteristic of what verse truly is.

Slater, on the other hand, claims ‘most take all’ to be ‘a common proverb (cf. *winner takes all*). God is *Most*; everything returns to him, including Herbert’s verse and all the things it isn’t that are listed in the preceding lines’.¹³⁷ On this note, it is also possible to take the subject of the last line, declaring ‘winner takes all’ to refer to the speaker’s own self. A

¹³⁶ F. P. Wilson, ‘A Note on George Herbert’s “The Quidditie”’, *RES*, 76 (1943), pp. 398-399 (p.398). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹³⁷ Slater, p. 423.

possible paraphrase of the line would read: ‘My verse is that which, while I write, brings me closest to God, while, paradoxically, securing the spoils (of honour and renown) which I at first am willing to let go in foregoing worldly pursuits’. This attitude is wholly in accordance with Scripture: ‘But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.’¹³⁸ In poetry, then, the poet comes closest to God as well as to ‘winning it all’ (taking all).

Wilson’s analysis, however, bears to mind the ‘paradox of mutual containing’ discussed in chapter one, as ‘God the all-powerful takes complete possession’ (p. 399) of the poet, who on his side uses his verse to be with God. The final line is neatly divided in two: The first half ‘I am with thee’ indicates the poet’s active participation, while the latter ‘and *most take all*’ declares God’s omnipotence. Herbert thus argues the relationship between poet and God as essential to his verse.

The actual poem that remains on paper is a trace of the poet’s experience of being with God, the essence of which has been lived in the act of writing. Vendler identifies a trait in Herbert’s poetry, which supports the notion of the poem as lived experience:

That interior work of seeing life accurately which must, at least in logical priority, precede accurate expression is particularly evident in Herbert, and is sometimes not even complete before the poem begins; the refining and purifying continue even as the poem is actually being constructed.¹³⁹

Perhaps it is this immediacy that lead to a characteristic in Herbert’s verse identified and described by Wilcox. She points to an interesting feature in Herbert’s diction, in relation to ‘Easter’, but aiming at describing Herbert’s style more generally: ‘It is typical of Herbert that the poem should begin with the high art [...] and equally representative of Herbert’s achievements that it should then find its resolution in the plainness of common metre and [...] triumphant clarity.’¹⁴⁰

2.3 The Poem as act

Considering the poem as act, we may then, first of all understand it as experience. A clear trait in Herbert’s poetry pertaining to this is its very lyric quality, where the self is very much involved. A rather broad definition of the lyric presents it as ‘any fairly short poem, uttered by

¹³⁸ Matthew 6. 33 (KJV).

¹³⁹ Vendler, pp. 6-7.

¹⁴⁰ Wilcox, p. 186.

a single speaker, who expresses a state of mind or a process of perception, thought, and feeling'.¹⁴¹ In Herbert's case, this process or feeling is the first poem, authored by God in his work of salvation and sanctification in Herbert.

Secondly, the poem as act may be understood as a reaction to this experience. The *OED* defines 'reaction' as the 'influence which a thing, acted upon or affected by another, exercises in return upon the agent, or in turn upon something else'.¹⁴² As such, the intended audience of the poetry is the Christian God, who not only moves Herbert to an experience, but is moved by him in return.

Sighs and groans

A significant and recurrent theme in *The Temple* is that of 'sighs and groans', a trope which illustrates the idea of the poem on the level of experience. A groan is 'a low vocal murmur, emitted involuntarily under pressure of pain or distress'.¹⁴³ Although uttered, it is hardly articulated. A groan is first and foremost an audible manifestation of a thing felt. As such, a groan carries no semantic meaning but signifies as an act.

To groan is to 'express earnest longing by groans; to yearn or long, as if with groans'.¹⁴⁴ The notion of yearning entails two states or conditions; the present, and the one longed for. In Herbert's case, the first condition is linked to the fallen nature of Man, the second to the holiness of God. The intermediate sphere of longing is experienced and expressed through sighs and groans, which are both spiritual and corporeal in nature. To begin with, the groan is in 'Sion' juxtaposed to the material temple of Salomon: 'All Solomons sea of brasse and world of stone | Is not so deare to thee as one good grone' (ll. 17-18). Its superiority lies in its non-material nature, and subsequent ability to reach the heavens:

And truly brasse and stones are heavie things,
Tombes for the dead, not temples fit for thee:
But grones are quick, and full of wings,
And all their motions upward be;
And ever as they mount, like larks they sing;
The note is sad, yet musick for a King. (ll. 19-24)

The above passage suggests the poet paring with the Spirit in flight, as discussed in chapter one. In 'Affliction (III)' the workings of the Holy Spirit within the poet are shown to become manifest in a sigh, while the poet is reduced to a passive instrument: 'My heart did heave, and

¹⁴¹ Abrams, p. 153.

¹⁴² *OED*, 'reaction' 2. a.

¹⁴³ *OED*, 'groan, *n.*'

¹⁴⁴ *OED*, 'groan, *v.*' 6.

there came forth, *O God!* | By that I knew that thou wast in the grief' (ll. 1-2). The reference to Romans reveals important insight into the interrelationship between God and the Christian poet:

Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.¹⁴⁵

In this light, the poet's groan shows him to be an instrument of the divine, who 'helpeth our infirmities' (v. 26). Being thus 'played' upon unto a groan is, however, a very physical experience. In 'Longing' Herbert laments the ordeal in strikingly bodily terms:

With sick and famisht eyes,
With doubling knees and weary bones,
To thee my cries,
To thee my grones,
To thee my sighs, my tears ascend:
No end? (ll. 1-6)

The close affinity of body and soul is made explicit as the speaker cries 'My throat, my soul is hoarse' (l. 7). In 'The Collar' the renegade poet complains: 'What? shall I ever sigh and pine?' (l. 3), tired of the ordeal altogether.

Although excruciating, the sighs and groans afford, however, the necessary outlet for the body and soul in pain. In 'Busnesse' the speaker declares:

If thou hast no sighs or grones,
Would thou hadst no flesh and bones!
Lesser pains scape greater ones. (ll. 12-14)

Again, in 'The Storm' the relieving effect of the groan is clear as Herbert likens it to a storm: 'Poets have wrong'd poore storms: such dayes are best; | They purge the aire without, within the breast' (ll. 17-18). A good groan, then, has the power to clear the poet's heart. The trope of sighs and groans works thus to explain how God frames the poet's heart through affliction.

Another significance of the groan is its power to affect or to move God. In 'The Storm' Herbert writes:

¹⁴⁵ Romans 8. 26-27 (KJV).

If as the windes and waters here below
 Do flie and flow,
 My sighs and tears as busie were above;
 Sure they would move
 And much affect thee, as tempestuous times
 Amaze poore mortals, and object their crimes. (ll. 1-6)

In ‘Gratefulnesse’ the speaker again declares his object to move his divine audience: ‘See how thy beggar works on thee | By art’ (ll. 3-4). Neither the groan nor sigh, nor the heart in tears, are in themselves that which is holy and pure. Quite the contrary, they bring with them the soil of earthly misery to the courts of heaven. Still, they are welcome:

Perpetuall knockings at thy doore,
Tears sullyng thy transparent rooms,
[...]

This notwithstanding, thou wentst on,
And didst allow us all our noise:
Nay, thou hast made a sigh and grone
Thy joyes.

Not that thou hast not still above
Much better tunes, then grones can make;
But that these country-aires thy love
Did take. (ll. 13-14, 17-24)

The ‘countrey-aires’ are pleasing to God simply because they epitomize is the poet’s longing for ‘such a heart, whose pulse may be | Thy praise’ (ll. 31-32).

Prayer and praise

Ultimately, prayer is ‘something understood’ (‘Prayer (i)’, l. 14), a notion which ‘abolishes or expunges the need for explanatory metaphors. Metaphor, Herbert seems to say, is after all only an approximation: once something is understood, we can fall silent’.¹⁴⁶

However, while the groan makes the inner experience audible, it is not yet made comprehensible. It is only when the experience gives rise to a verbal reaction in the poet, the sighs giving way to a conscious response, that the poem becomes intelligible. In a poem titled 'Sighs and Groans' Herbert sets out to give words to his longing in form of a prayer. The sighs and groans marked by the exclamatory 'O' are spelled out in the first and last lines of each stanza. They seem to originate in the experience of affliction examined more closely in

¹⁴⁶ Vendler, p. 39.

each stanza, and culminate in a prayer: 'My God, relieve me!' (l. 30), capturing the inner workings of the spirit towards God in language.

In 'Artillerie' the poet claims: 'we are shooters both' (l. 25), having presented to his artillery some half a dozen lines before: 'My tears and prayers night and day do woove, | And work up to thee' (ll. 19-20), while God works on him by motions upon the poet's heart (l. 7), symbolized by the shooting star (l. 2). The reciprocal nature of Herbert's verse is made clear through the notion of returning, first introduced in 'The Dedication':

*Lord, my first fruits present themselves to thee;
Yet not mine neither: for from thee they came,
And must return.* (ll. 1-3)

In 'Prayer (I)' Herbert describes devotion as 'Gods breath in man returning to his birth' (l. 2), and more, as 'Engine against th' Almighty' (l. 5), thus introducing Man as an independent and forceful agent, who through prayer can work on God.

The function of rhetoric

Prayer is further described as 'Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest' (l. 11), where the notion of dress, or rhetoric, is rather interesting. Appearing before the heavenly ordinance, where all is true and pure, Man is not naked, but 'well drest'. He is not sheer sigh or groan, but appears well clothed in language. In 'Sion' the speaker likewise admires the splendid ornaments of the temple built by Solomon:

Lord, with what glorie wast thou serv'd of old,
When Solomons temple stood and flourished!
Where most things were of purest gold;
The wood was all embellished
With flowers and carvings, mysticall and rare:
All show'd the builders, crav'd the seeers [sic!] care. (ll. 1-6)

If we insist on the parallel between the Old Testament temple of God, the Christian as a temple for the Holy Spirit, and *The Temple* as an embodiment of praise, the first stanza of 'Sion' acquires additional depth. The materials that make up the building are skilfully 'embellished | With flowers and carvings' (ll. 4-5). The same may be said of the poetry of *The Temple*, where Herbert shows himself as a true rhetorician.

These carvings not only 'show'd the builders' (l. 6), but significantly, also 'crav'd the seeers [sic!] care' (l. 6). The temple did not merely house the presence of God, but its outer embellishments craved the seer's attention. Their symbolic value could communicate some aspect of the mystery therein to the careful beholder.

2.4 The Poem as artefact

When we view the poem as artefact, it is no longer linked directly to the author's person. The notion of the text's autonomy in this sense is clear from 'The Dedication': '*Lord, my first fruits present themselves to thee*' (l. 1), where Herbert refers to his lines as independent agents, able to present themselves. What remains, are the text and the reader. As the first poem is Herbert's reading of the divine text on his heart, the second poem 'happens' in the act of reading the letters Herbert wrote on the page. There are two perceivable incentives for writing the poem in this second sense – copying what God has written on the poet's heart.

A monument

On the one hand, the poet may simply have wanted to write a record of a heart in devotion that may carry witness to his faith and continue to signify the act of devotion that led up to it. If the poet would chance to hold his peace ('The Altar', l. 13), Herbert writes: 'These stones to praise thee may not cease' (l. 14), echoing the notion of eternalization through verse voiced in another famous couplet: 'So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, | *So long lives this*, and this gives life to thee.'¹⁴⁷ The words are 'stones' (l. 14) in the sense that they enjoy a continued existence beyond the mere century allotted to Man. The poem in its physical existence as words on paper is independent of the poet and may live on regardless of his continued effort or existence.

'Bait of pleasure'

On the other hand, the poet may have wanted to induce others to follow his example. Clarke points out: 'although it is God's approval that he seeks, he cannot be writing for God alone: if he were, the spontaneous utterance [sighs and groans] would be all that was necessary. Thus the poem has to be rhetorically, as well as spiritually, successful.'¹⁴⁸ The sigh must be interpreted and transcribed into legible form in order to bear significance to his fellow men. This requires a conscious effort on behalf of the poet, which I shall discuss more closely in chapter three, when examining the poet's role in the creative process more closely.

In the opening stanza of 'Perirrhaneum' Herbert identifies this second audience as his fellow men, and announces the aim of his endeavour to rhyme him to good:

¹⁴⁷ William Shakespeare, Sonnet '18', in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. by Katherine Duncan-Jones, The Arden Shakespeare, III (London: Thomson Learning, 2002), p.147, ll.13-14 (my italics).

¹⁴⁸ Clarke, pp. 52-53.

Thou, whose sweet youth and early hopes inhance
Thy rate and price, and mark thee for a treasure;
Hearken unto a Verser, who may chance
Ryme thee to good, and make a bait of pleasure.
A verse may find him, who a sermon flies,
And turn delight into a sacrifice. (ll. 1-6)

Here Herbert the rhetorician steps in, not challenging, but complementing Herbert the priest, since ‘A verse may find him, who a sermon flies’ (l. 5), as their common goal is to ‘turn delight into a sacrifice’ (l. 6). The pairing of the rhetorician with the priest is vital, however, for it is when ‘inspired directly by God, or moved by his own love of God, [that] the Christian poet will achieve an *energeia* in his writing which will move his readers to virtue’.¹⁴⁹ The poetry of *The Temple* is not merely sincere – it is also artful in the sense that it skilfully adapts means to ends. The priest is responsible for the poem on the spiritual level, the rhetorician on the actual.

2.5 Chapter conclusion

In this chapter I set out to discuss the nature of the poem in Herbert based on the notion of dual authority presented in chapter one. The division between the poem as experience and the poem on paper may seem artificial, but it will prove most useful in laying the premises for Herbert’s poetics of integrity discussed in the third and final chapter.

The poem, then, may be understood at once as both an act and an artefact. As an act, it is perceived of as God’s work in the poet, reforming his heart through affliction, the poet’s experience and subsequent reaction. In context of *The Temple*, the experience manifests itself initially in form of sighs and groans. When the poet takes up his pen and transcribes this experience in language, the poem, as we know it, is brought into existence. It becomes an artefact. This second poem is separated from the poet’s immediate experience although claimed to have sprung from it. The inner experience is now a mere shadow, and the poem must stand on its own.

The notion of the dual nature of the poem betrays the poet’s two-fold audience: God and Man alike. It is God who authors the first poem through affliction, and reads it in form of the poet’s inner reaction. This first poem is ultimately hidden from us as readers, but the poetics of *The Temple* seem to rely on its existence. The existential nature of the poem is

¹⁴⁹ Clarke, p. 21.

highlighted in 'The Quidditie', where the secondary characteristics of the poem are overshadowed by this one distinguishing characteristic: the poem as an intimate relationship. Herbert is, however, keenly aware of another readership, identified in 'Perirrhanterium'. In the next chapter I shall look more closely at the poet's role in the process of communicating the experience to his readers, and the role of Herbert's ideal reader in the moment of reception.

3. Herbert's Poetics

Herbert's preoccupation with the nature of his verse runs alongside his preoccupation with the integrity of his poetry, where the poet and the poem form an integral whole. This chapter will argue that Herbert advocates through his poetry in *The Temple* a poetics of integrity.

Chapter overview

In the first part of this third and concluding chapter, the spiritual and material aspects of the poem converge in a reading of 'A true Hymne', in which Herbert promotes the Christian ideal of corresponding faith and deeds. The notion is further explored through an analysis of the phrase 'lines and life' in 'The Collar' (l. 4), and in 'The Banquet' (l. 51), also echoed in various terms in poems such as 'Constancie', 'Obedience', and 'The Dedication'. Here, the two poems of 'The Altar' are linked together, suggestive of a poetics of integrity in Herbert. Finally, under the subtitle 'lines vs. life' I will argue through a reading of 'The Forerunners' that truth is ultimately dearer to Herbert, than is the art of rhetoric.

Two additional aspects of Herbert's poetics must yet be taken into closer consideration, in the light of the above: the role of the poet within the system of authority discussed in chapter one, and the role and position of the reader, considering the nature of the poem discussed in chapter two.

The second part of this chapter will therefore turn to examine how Herbert portrayed the role of the poet through his verse. I will discuss two complementing functions for the poet found in 'Providence', 'Sonnet (II)', 'Jesu', and 'The Windows', in which Herbert refers to and exemplifies the poet's role as both confidant and interpreter of heavenly truth.

As mentioned in chapter two, Herbert did not merely orientate his verse towards the heavens, but was even acutely aware of reader reception. I will finally consider the role and position of the reader as we find it in Herbert, and discuss the notion of a 'correct' reading endorsed by Herbert in relation to modern theory of reader reception.

A note on 'life'

As mentioned in the introduction, by 'life' I do not mean to refer to Herbert's biography. 'Life' will in the context of this chapter simply refer to the 'condition or attribute of living or being alive', and moreover, 'energy in action, thought, or expression' or even 'animation, vivacity [and] spirit'.¹⁵⁰

3.1 Poetics of integrity

It seems to me that Herbert's poetics in the sense discussed in the preceding chapters take form most explicitly in a poem entitled 'A true Hymne', where the speaker claims that 'The fineness which a hymne or psalme affords, | Is, when the soul unto the lines accords' (ll. 9-10). The notion is echoed in various terms throughout the poetry of *The Temple*, perhaps most markedly in the phrase 'lines and life', where the alliteration underlines the connection Herbert so forcefully advocates between the two.

'A true Hymne'

The poem opens with a cliché-ridden first line 'My joy, my life, my crown!' (l. 1), seemingly betraying lack of original thought. Somewhat embarrassed, the speaker explains:

My heart was meaning all the day,
Somewhat it fain would say:
And still it runneth mutt'ring up and down
With onely this, *My joy, my life, my crown.* (ll. 2-5)

Already in this first stanza we are able to identify the very poetics found in 'The Altar', as discussed in chapter two. It is the poet's heart that yearns to say something. He is, however, able to come up with 'onely this' (l. 5), namely three phrases quite unlikely to impress the reader. In 'The Altar' the priest paired with the poet and skilfully erected an altar of words, reflecting the altar 'Made of a heart' (l. 2). In 'A true Hymne' Herbert lets the heart's mutter stand forth on paper as plainly as it was formed in his heart, thus highlighting the inherent standard for fine poetry, ultimately more important than its appearance in language:

Yet slight not these few words:
If truly said, they may take part
Among the best in art.
The fineness which a hymne or psalme affords,
Is, when the soul unto the lines accords. (ll. 6-10)

¹⁵⁰ OED, 'life, *n.*' I. and I. 4. a.

It is not enough that the poem stands forth as polished verbal artefact. Indeed, Herbert turns the tables. Instead of regarding the form of the poem as its essential quality, he ascribes it rather to its matter. The quality of his verse is dependent on the integrity of the poet when writing his verse, rather than the art of arranging words on the page:

He who craves all the minde,
And all the soul, and strength, and time,
If the words onely ryme,
Justly complains, that somewhat is behinde
To make his verse, or write a hymne in kinde. (ll. 11-15)

The quality of his verse is ultimately checked by Herbert's primary audience, God, who is preoccupied with the inner man rather than his outer appearance, and with the sincerity of the poet rather than the rhetorical finesse of the poem. Accordingly, he is interested in the motive of the poet, which, characteristic of Herbert, is made manifest in a sigh:

Whereas if th' heart be moved,
Although the verse be somewhat scant,
God doth supplie the want.
As when th' heart sayes (sighing to be approved)
O, could I love! and stops: God writeth, *Loved*. (ll. 16-20)

In response to the poet's sigh, God cuts in, writing '*Loved*' (l. 20). The word cannot be annexed to the sigh '*O, could I love!*' (l. 20), which is already completed. Neither could it replace the word '*love*' (l. 20), as the sentence would then make no sense grammatically. Rather, it points to the previous line, and more specifically the word '*approved*' (l. 19), with which it rhymes. God thus cuts in to correct the same misperception that had taken over the speaker in '*The Collar*'. In '*The Collar*' God corrected the poet's self image from that of a servant to that of a child. In '*A true Hymne*' the speaker, like a servant, yearns for approval. God reminds him that a child need not be approved, but is loved, signifying the intimate relationship between Herbert and God, which opens up for the notion of dual authorship discussed in chapter one.

'Lines and life'

The phrase '*lines and life*' is first found in '*The Collar*', in a context where the speaker forcefully claims his independency:

Moreover, it is of the essence that his response be sincere, truthful and candid. In 'Constancie' the speaker asks: 'Who is the honest man?' (l. 1). The answer celebrates sincerity: 'To God, his neighbour, and himself most true' (l. 3), and the love of truth:

Whose honestie is not
So loose or easie, that a ruffling winde
Can blow away, or glittering look it blinde: (ll. 6-8)

Sincerity and truth combined constitute integrity: 'His words and works and fashion too | All of a piece, and all are cleare and straight' (ll. 19-20).

In 'Life' Herbert links his life with his verse in very direct terms:

I made a posie, while the day ran by:
Here will I smell my remnant out, and tie
My life within this band. (ll. 1-3)

The metaphor pertaining to flowers works alternatively to explain the poet's life and his verse. At first, the poet contemplates a posy, which may refer to both a 'small bunch of flowers, [...] a nosegay or small bouquet', or figuratively, to a 'collection of pleasant poetry or rhetoric'.¹⁵¹ As such, the flowers clearly denote poetry. Within the band of flowers, or within his poetry, the poet has tied his life. As he continues to observe the bouquet in his hands, the flowers now turn to illustrate the life of the poet as it tends toward death:

But Time did becken to the flowers, and they
By noon most cunningly did steal away,
And wither'd in my hand.

My hand was next to them, and then my heart: (ll. 4-7)

Their 'time' (l. 13) sweetly spent, the flowers now function as metaphor for the poet's life. As the next lines render how this time was spent, focusing on their produce, the reference is again to the poet's work: 'Fit, while ye liv'd, for smell or ornament, | And after death for cures' (ll. 14-15). In the following line, the focus shifts again to the actual life of the poet:

I follow straight without complaints or grief,
Since if my sent be good, I care not if
It be as short as yours. (ll. 16-18)

If his life is as sweet to God as are the flowers to him, he does not mind that it is 'as short' (l. 18). While he lives his life joins with his verse, infusing it with a scent that may reach the heavens. As compositions they serve as ornaments. When he has passed, the remnants of this

¹⁵¹ *OED*, 'posy, *n.*' 2. a. and b.

life, the poems on paper, are like dried flowers that work for cure to those who read them and thrust their hearts into the lines once again.

In all the above examples, the same underlying pattern is discerned, as Herbert pairs the abstract and the concrete, the spiritual and the bodily expression, advocating integrity. In 'The Posie' Herbert makes another – contrasting – pairing: 'Let wits contest, | And with their words and posies windows fill' (l. 1-2). In contrast to the above, 'words and posies' (l. 2) is not a paring of two complementary aspects of existence, but of two things that operate on the same level of reality, namely language. Hence the derogatory 'Let wits contest' (l. 1), as such word-games have no real substance, when they are not paired with life. This reading is backed up by the line of argument in 'The Windows', where preaching the word and living the life of a believer, are argued to be complementary of each other:

Doctrine and life, colours and light, in one
When they combine and mingle, bring
A strong regard and aw: but speech alone
Doth vanish like a flaring thing,
And in the eare, not conscience ring. (ll. 11-15)

The 'colours and light' (l. 11) present yet another paraphrase of the same underlying pattern. As I will discuss in relation to the role of the poet, the light (truth) of God is interpreted and exemplified in the life of the believer, which affords it colour, making the light visible.

For a final comment on the pairing exemplified by 'lines and life', let us turn to *The Countrey Parson*. Under the section 'The Parson's Library' Herbert writes: 'The Countrey Parson's Library is a holy Life', explaining his postulate: 'So that the Parson having studied, and mastered all his lusts and affections within, and the whole Army of Temptations without, hath ever so many sermons ready penn'd, as he hath victories'.¹⁵² Lived experience is further superior to book learning: 'He that hath been sick [...] and knows what recovered him, is a Physitian so far as he meetes with the same disease, and temper; and can much better, and particularly do it [treat the sickness], then he that is generally learned, and was never sick.'¹⁵³ In this light, we may read the conclusion of 'Jordan (II)': '*There is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd: | Copie out onely that, and save expense*' (ll. 17-18). In order to be able to copy love, the poet must love. In other words, his love of God is a poem, which he may transcribe onto paper.

¹⁵² *Works*, p. 278.

¹⁵³ *Works*, p. 278.

Life vs. lines

In 'The Forerunners' Herbert seeks to define the essence of his poetry apart from, although not set against, the art of rhetoric, as already hinted towards in 'A true Hymne'. The speaker of the poem reflects on the effects of old age, symbolized by appearing white hairs. They do not represent respectable old age, which would have been a conventional biblical symbol.¹⁵⁴ In stead, these 'harbringers' (l. 1) are indicative of the loss of the poet's mental vigour:

The harbringers are come. See, see their mark;
White is their colour, and behold my head.
But must they have my brain? must they dispart
Those sparkling notions, which therein were bred?
Must dulnesse turn me to a clod? (ll. 1-5)

The notion of mental dullness turning him to a lump of clay shows the grey hairs prefiguring death. The movement of the stanza is the reversed tale of the creation of Man: 'And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.'¹⁵⁵ Now the vigour of life gradually fades out, and man is turned to dust once again. While he gradually must return to earth, what remains, however, is the truth of God, which is the core foundation of his argument: 'Yet have they left me, *Thou art still my God*' (l. 6). Even more, he rejoices that although he may lose his mental faculties, his heart where this line is engraved, is still intact:

Good men ye be, to leave me my best room,
Ev'n all my heart, and what is lodged there:
I passe not, I, what of the rest become,
So *Thou art still my God*, be out of fear. (ll. 7-10)

Herbert thus clearly differentiates between the brilliant and the sincere, between the product of his brain and that of his heart. He goes on to challenge the notion of what constitutes wit: 'He will be pleased with that dittie; | And if I please him, I write fine and wittie' (ll. 11-12). This links nicely with the idea voiced in 'A true Hymne' that if the poet's heart is moved, even though 'the verse be somewhat scant, | God doth supplie the want' (ll. 17-18).

A question presents itself: Just how does God supposedly intervene? It would be silly to propose that God actually wrote in 'Loved' (l. 20) with Herbert's pen and in Herbert's ink, when he was not watching. How, then, can Herbert claim that God makes his verse witty, or, in any way 'doth supplie the want' (l. 18)? We have already discussed the question of

¹⁵⁴ 'The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness' Proverbs 16. 31 (KJV).

¹⁵⁵ Genesis 2. 7 (KJV).

authority in chapter one, and described a notion of dual authorship for the poems. Another angle takes up the reception of the poems. The key here is to read the poems in the ‘right spirit’, as implied by the poet in ‘The Dedication’: ‘*Turn their eyes hither, who shall make a gain: | Theirs, who shall hurt themselves or me, refrain*’ (ll. 5-6). In the act of reading, the Spirit of God provides the understanding of the verse’s underlying truth. Perhaps the notion of wit in ‘The Forerunners’ refers to the spiritual rather than mental sharpness of Herbert’s poet, and consequently that of his ideal reader, who should be able to see and appreciate the beauty in that truth.

The ‘sweet phrases [and] lovely metaphors’ (l. 13) leave the poet as his mind deteriorates. As discussed in both chapters one and two, it is not beautiful language or rhetoric itself that stands in opposition to true poetry. On the contrary, Herbert makes good use of them. It is what I would term ‘empty’ rhetoric, or wordplay, that is not in accordance with the poet’s life, that comes short of the kind of poetry that is, in a word, lived. In this line of thought, Hebert does not drive away the ‘Lovely enchanting language’ (l. 19), but concludes:

Yet if you go, I passe not; take your way:
For, *Thou art still my God*, is all that ye
Perhaps with more embellishment can say. (ll. 31-33)

The truth of the poem is not dependent on the rhetorically successful composition. The composition, on the other hand, to be considered fine by Herbert, must spring from this truth. Herbert quaintly illustrates this in ‘Home’ by stepping out of the rhyme scheme in order to record what he really wants to say: ‘And ev’n my verse, when by the ryme and reason | The word is, *Stay*, sayes ever, *Come*’ (ll. 75-76). Of course, this is another rhetorical device, to break with the expected formula in order to ‘enact’ in language the pressing need to say something that does not necessarily keep with the form. Still, I think he succeeds in making the point.

As the aging poet’s appearance grows pallid – so, figuratively, does his verse, as the ‘sparkling notions’ (l. 4) leave him like ‘birds of spring’ (l. 34) that flee the approaching winter. The speaker of ‘The Forerunners’ refuses to lament this, however. Herbert averts rather to an unexpected and delightful image of life retiring indoors for the winter:

Go birds of spring: let winter have his fee;
Let a bleak paleness chalk the doore,
So all within be livelier then before. (ll. 34-36)

The effect of this last line is not only that we understand the spiritual as lasting beyond our earthly lives but it is argued to be even more lively, when not having to be put into words.

3.2 The role of the poet

Although truth is more dear to the aging poet depicted in ‘The Forerunners’ than is rhetoric, he still holds that ‘Beautie and beauteous words should go together’ (l. 30). In ‘The Dedication’ Herbert calls to God: ‘And make us *strive*, who shall sing *best* thy name’ (l. 4, my italics). As discussed in chapter two, the quality of the verse is dependent not solely on divine inspiration but the skill and effort of the poet. Clarke effectively summarises the task that falls on the poet: ‘The inspiration does not flow through the preacher in an effortless flood. The intellectual powers of the divine orator are at full stretch to *understand* the divine message, and then to *convey* it adequately, in a two-stage process.’¹⁵⁶ Within the system of authority established in chapter one, the poet is on the receiving end of divine communication. In light of the poem as both act and artefact, he is in the position to both interpret it, and to communicate it to his readers.

The poet as confidant

In ‘Providence’ Herbert calls the poet ‘Secretarie of thy praise’ (l. 8). A straightforward reading of ‘secretary’ would be, of course, ‘one whose office it is to write for another; *spec.* one who is employed to conduct or assist with correspondence, to keep records, and (usually) to transact various other business’.¹⁵⁷ In ‘Providence’ this ‘another’ is identified as the rest of creation:

Beasts fain would sing; birds dittie to their notes;
Trees would be tuning on their native lute
To thy renown: but all their hands and throats
Are brought to Man, while they are lame and mute. (ll. 9-12)

The *OED* records, however, an additional definition of ‘secretary’, which I will argue to apply directly to Herbert. ‘Secretary’ may refer to ‘one who is entrusted with private or secret matters; a confidant’,¹⁵⁸ a use which is now obsolete, but documented to have been in use in Herbert’s lifetime. In line with the notion recorded in ‘Providence’: ‘Of all the creatures both in sea and land | Onely to Man thou hast made known thy wayes’ (ll. 5-6), we may read ‘Secretarie’ (l. 8) in this role of a confidant.

Illustrative of this attitude, Herbert records in *The Country Parson* a prayer for use before a sermon: ‘this word of thy rich peace, and reconciliation, thou hast committed, not to

¹⁵⁶ Clarke, p. 54 (my italics).

¹⁵⁷ *OED*, ‘secretary, *n.*¹ (and *a.*)’ A. n. 2. a.

¹⁵⁸ *OED* ‘secretary, *n.*¹ (and *a.*)’ A. n. 1. a.

Thunder, or Angels, but to silly and sinfull men: even to me, pardoning my sins, and bidding me go feed the people of thy love [...] Awake therefore, my Lute, and my Viol! awake all my powers to glorifie thee!'.¹⁵⁹ The notion is echoed in one of his most direct comments on writing poetry, which epitomises the relational aspect of Herbert's poetics: '*There is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd: | Copie out onely that, and save expense*' ('Jordan (II)', ll. 17-18), with emphasis on '*Copie*'. 'The Flower' advocates the same underlying idea as, opposed to the attitude of the poet-maker, the speaker admits:

We say amisse,
This or that is:
Thy word is all, if we could spell. (ll. 19-21)

In this sense of the poet as secretary, the roles are reversed. In the first instance, God is the audience and creation the employer. As a confidant, however, the Christian poet may be 'entrusted with the secrets or commands of God'.¹⁶⁰ Now, it is God who employs the poet in transcribing his message to rest of creation and mankind. The idea is not new, but parallels Scripture: 'Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.'¹⁶¹

In the role of secretary, Herbert exclaims in 'Sonnet (II)': 'Lord, in thee | The *beauty* lies in the *discovery*' (ll. 13-14). 'Discovery' may be read as 'revelation' or 'disclosure'¹⁶² – such as is enjoyed by a confidant. The notion of discovery entails a slightly more active role for the poet, however, as it suggests not only the aspect of revelation or disclosure, but also that of exploration and investigation. Herbert is indeed concerned with seeking and finding in many of his poems, such as 'The Thanksgiving': 'My musick shall finde thee, and ev'ry string | Shall have his attribute to sing' (ll. 39-40). In 'Death' he describes the folly of merely investigating the natural, looking only on 'this side' of death:

We lookt on this side of thee, shooting short;
Where we did finde
The shells of fledge souls left behinde,
Dry dust, which sheds no tears, but may extort. (ll. 9-12)

The lament echoes another in 'Vanitie (I)': 'Poore man, thou searchest round | To finde out *death*, but missest *life* at hand' (ll. 27-28).

¹⁵⁹ *Works*, p. 289.

¹⁶⁰ *OED*, 'secretary, *n*¹. (and *a.*)' A. n. 1. c.

¹⁶¹ 1 Corinthians 4. 1 (KJV).

¹⁶² *OED*, 'discovery' 2.

In 'Love (II)' the poet need be kindled by the Spirit: 'Immortall Heat, O let thy greater flame | Attract the lesser to it' (ll. 1-2). As a consequence, the poet may declare with hope:

Our eies shall see thee, which before saw dust;
Dust blown by wit, till that they both were blinde:
[...]
All knees shall bow to thee; all wits shall rise,
And praise him who did make and mend our eies. (ll. 9-10, 13-14)

In 'Dulnesse' he describes the frustration of the opposite. Instead of flying off with the Spirit, he is 'lost in flesh'. In order to see clearly again, he prays the Lord to clear his sight and understanding:

But I am lost in flesh, whose sugred lyes
Still mock me, and grow bold:
Sure thou didst put a minde there, if I could
Finde where it lies.

Lord, cleare thy gift, that with a constant wit
I may but look towards thee (ll. 21-26)

In 'Home' the two alternatives are brought together:

[...] I must get up and see.
O show thy self to me,
Or take me up to thee! (ll. 34-36)

Both the role of discoverer: 'I must get up and see' (l. 34), and that of secretary as confidant: 'O show thy self to me' (l. 35), offer ways for the poet to reach beyond his merely human understanding. The biblical reference endorses Herbert's advocated practice: 'if thou seek him, he will be found of thee'.¹⁶³

What the 'discovery' in the final line of 'Sonnet (II)' is, presents indeed at first a mystery. To understand what Herbert points to we may examine another instance where he uses the word 'discovery'. Let us turn to a manuscript version of 'Easter' found in Dr. Willams's Library.¹⁶⁴

The Sunn arising in the East
Though hee bring light & th'other sents:
Can not make vp so braue a feast
As thy discouerie presents. (ll. 5-8)

¹⁶³ 1 Chronicles 28. 9 (KJV).

¹⁶⁴ *Works*, p. 42 [footnote].

As the sunrise is here likened to ‘thy discouerie’ (l. 8), we understand in context of the sonnet above, that the risen Lord is to Herbert even more beautiful than the ‘feast’ (l. 7) the natural sun presents to the beholder. The pun between ‘sun’ and ‘son’ was a favourite of Herbert’s as is clear from ‘The Sonne’: ‘How neatly doe we give one onely name | To parents issue and the sunnes bright starre!’ (ll. 5-6), and as he effectively employs the pun in the final couplet: ‘For what Christ once in humblenesse began, | We him in glorie call, *The Sonne of Man*’ (ll. 13-14). The risen ‘Sonne’ is brighter and more beautiful than the ‘Sunn arising in the East’ (l. 5). The discovery is, in its essence, the revelation of the risen Lord.

The poet as interpreter

Herbert comments on his relationship to Scripture in ‘The H. Scriptures (II)’:

Such are thy secrets, which my life makes good,
And comments on thee: for in ev’ry thing
Thy words do finde me out, & parallels bring,
And in another make me understood. (ll. 9-12)

The reciprocity between Herbert and Scripture is striking, as Herbert puts forward a notion of mutual hermeneutics, where not only does Scripture interpret Herbert, but his life interprets Scripture. Herbert’s life ‘makes good’ – exemplifies or illustrates – heavenly secrets. In the opposite direction, the word of God explains his very existence, and makes him ‘understood’.

The process of interpretation is rather neatly illustrated in ‘Jesu’, where the poet starts out by plainly declaring his faith: ‘JESU is in my heart, his sacred name | Is deeply carved there’ (ll. 1-2). As such, the message is conventional: Christ dwells in his heart by faith.¹⁶⁵ The metaphor of writing on the heart is compellingly close to a picture used by Paul to the Church in Corinth: ‘Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.’¹⁶⁶ It is the Spirit that has written on the heart of the believer the name of his Savior. The Christian poet, in the role of secretary, at first merely records what God has ‘carved’ (l. 2) on his heart – a name recorded, but not yet interpreted. The status quo does not last for long, however. Already in the second line, a crisis occurs:

[...] but th’other week
A great affliction broke the little frame,
Ev’n all to pieces [...] (ll. 2-4)

¹⁶⁵ Ephesians 3. 17 (KJV).

¹⁶⁶ II Corinthians 3. 3 (KJV).

Again, affliction plays a central role. As discussed in chapter two, as a recurrent trope in *The Temple*, affliction is shown to effectively reform the poet's heart. It has broken the static 'frame' (l. 3), which must have been stiff and unyielding since it could break 'Ev'n all to pieces' (l. 4). The crisis moves the poet to introspection: 'which I went to seek' (l. 4)

His heart in pieces, the letters of the name carved therein dispersed, the poet is forced to regard each piece individually, seeing not a unified whole but different parts, or aspects, of the whole: 'And first I found the corner, where was *J*, | After, where *E S*, and next where *U* was graved' (ll. 5-6). Searching to put together the name once taken for granted, the poet takes on the role of interpreter:

When I had got these parcels, instantly
I sat me down to spell them, and perceived
That to my broken heart he was *I ease you*,
And to my whole is *J E S U*. (ll. 7-10)

The name recorded in the first line has in the course of the poem been taken apart, examined, and interpreted. '*JESU*' (l. 10) bears far greater significance to the speaker, than does '*JESU*' (l. 1). Through affliction he has experienced the import of having Christ in his heart. To his broken heart, the significance of Christ is his ability to relieve. The noun '*JESU*' (l. 1) has become an active verb '*ease*', within a relationship: '*I [...] you*' (l. 9), adding to the meaning as a whole. The word '*Jesu*' has been interpreted, and 'made good' through the acute experience of affliction, where its significance was felt, and only later communicated in the form of a poem.

To interpret is a two-stage process. First, the poet works to understand what he has been afforded by Providence. Next, he works to convey his understanding to his readers. In 'The Windows' Herbert takes up the poet's role as a medium of the knowledge he partakes through the Spirit to his fellow men, posing the question: 'Lord, how can man preach thy eternall word?' (l. 1). He is quick to identify his own frailty: 'He is a brittle crazie glasse' (l. 2), pointing out at once both his perceived potential as well as his weakness.

Glass may certainly serve as medium, in its transparent nature. We look right through it to that which it 'shows' us. However, Man is in Herbert's words both crazy and brittle. The metaphors are delightfully befitting. Relating to 'glasse', crazy may be read as 'full of cracks or flaws; damaged, impaired, unsound; liable to break or fall to pieces'. Describing Man, we may read the same as 'of unsound mind; insane, mad, demented'.¹⁶⁷ Likewise, 'brittle' as

¹⁶⁷ OED, 'crazy, *a.*' 1. and 4. a.

description of glass reads ‘liable to break, easily broken; fragile, breakable’. Describing Man, on the other hand, we must read it figuratively, as one who ‘breaks faith; inconstant, fickle’.¹⁶⁸ All the same, the speaker proceeds to describe the poet’s role in transmitting divine light through the glass, however imperfect:

Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford
This glorious and transcendent place,
To be a window, through thy grace. (ll. 3-5)

Seeing that the glass, or human nature, is not flawless, Clarke examines Herbert’s view on his role as a channel for the divine in relation to Savonarola’s concept of *Simplicitas*:

Savonarola talks of divine discourse as transmitting light: in this enterprise [...] the human medium should be as transparent as possible. Herbert, however, rejects ‘pure’ transparency in his poem ‘The Windows’: the light transmitted into the church by such preachers is ‘watrish, bleak, & thin’. Unexpectedly, it is stained glass that is the preferred medium for God’s message.¹⁶⁹

Indeed, as we continue to read the poem, we see that instead of opting to be of piece with a clear, perfect glass, Herbert turns in the opposite direction. Looking at the stained glass windows of the church, the poet draws a parallel to his own role as interpreter of God’s truth. He writes:

But when thou dost anneal in glasse thy storie,
Making thy life to shine within
The holy Preachers; then the light and glorie
More rev’rend grows, & more doth win
Which else shows watrish, bleak, & thin. (ll. 6-10)

Had the windows been clear, the light would have streamed in an uninterrupted – and uninterpreted – ray, although more or less altered due to Man’s imperfect nature. Now it travels through the story painted on the windows in vivid colours by skilled artists. Likewise, the poet must clothe his vision in words, making divine mysteries explicable. Paralleling the principle of incarnation, God provides in ‘The Windows’ the matter: ‘thy life to shine within’ (l. 7), while the poet provides the legible form, letting the light stream through the colours of his life, painted in words. I must agree with Clarke, that in Herbert’s poetry it is this ‘mixture of divine and human elements that is most compelling’.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ *OED*, ‘brittle, *a.*’ 1. *a.* and 2.

¹⁶⁹ Clarke, p. 68.

¹⁷⁰ Clarke, p. 68.

3.3 The role of the reader

The poetics of integrity entails a clear notion of the ideal poet. Another construct emerging from Herbert's poetic universe is the image of the ideal reader, which I shall now turn to describe in some more detail.

Herbert's ideal reader

On the very threshold to 'The Church' we are met by a preliminary note from the author on how to approach the volume of poetry therein:

Thou, whom the former precepts have
Sprinkled and taught, how to behave
Thy self in church; approach, and taste
The churches mysticall repast. ('Superliminare', ll. 1-4)

Herbert describes the verses in 'The Church-Porch' as 'precepts' (l. 1). They have 'Sprinkled and taught, how to behave' (l. 2) in 'church' (l. 3), suggestive of 'The Church'. The reader is further petitioned not merely to approach, but also to taste the meal therein, with a strong allusion to taking part in the Eucharist, 'The churches mysticall repast' (l. 4). The reader is urged to taste the poetry of *The Temple*, to incorporate it into his system, and not merely study and contemplate the verses therein from a safe distance. Not necessarily appreciating to the full what Herbert's claim on his reader entails, Clarke points out: 'As attention-gaining strategies, Herbert's are very powerful: he is setting a stage on which God is to be chief actor, and there is to be audience participation.'¹⁷¹ Herbert does indeed want attention, but he is not satisfied at that. He wants the reader to surrender himself to the truth underlying his verse.

The same way that Herbert interprets scripture through his lines and life, he invites the reader to interpret and live out his verse. In 'Perirrhaneion (I)' he declares his verse to be meant as 'a bait of pleasure' (l. 4). In 'Obedience' he declares his objective to 'Convey a Lordship' (l. 2):

My God, if writings may
Convey a Lordship any way
Whither the buyer and the seller please;
Let it not thee displease,
If this poore paper do as much as they. (ll. 1-5)

Interestingly, the speaker asks God to approve of his way of doing so in a way that pleases not only God, but also the reader: 'any way | Whither the *buyer* and the seller please' (ll. 2-3, my

¹⁷¹ Clarke, p. 55.

italics). The hidden quality of the verse lies, however, not in its form, but in its sincerity, heart and lines combining:

On it my heart doth bleed
As many lines, as there doth need
To passe it self and all it hath to thee.
To which I do agree,
And here present it as my speciall Deed. (ll. 1-10)

The deed works essentially to convey God's authority above the poet's:

Let me not think an action mine own way,
But as thy love shall sway,
Resigning up the rudder to thy skill. (ll. 18-20)

So far we have merely identified yet another instance of corresponding life and lines advocated by Herbert, paired with his submission to the sovereignty of God. What is remarkable, however, is the way he towards the end of the poem juxtaposes his reader with the poet:

He that will passe his land,
As I have mine, may set his hand
And heart unto this Deed, when he hath read;
And make the purchase spread
To both our goods, if he to it will stand.

How happie were my part,
If some kinde man would thrust his heart
Into these lines; till in heav'ns Court of Rolls
They were by winged souls
Entred for both, farre above their desert! (ll. 36-45)

The imagery is pervaded by the pattern of corresponding faith and deeds, advocating integrity, now on behalf of the reader. He must 'set his *hand* | And *heart* unto this Deed' (ll. 37-38, my italics), and thus 'thrust his heart | Into these lines' (ll. 42-43), reminiscent of the corresponding 'lines and life', as discussed above. First, however, he must be willing to 'passe his land' (l. 36), his own dominion, to God, entailing submission to his lordship. In effect, he must become Christian.

Indeed, the second stanza of the 'Superliminare' stands forth as a warning:

Avoid, Profanenesse; come not here:
Nothing but holy, pure, and cleare,
Or that which groneth to be so,
May at his perill further go. (ll. 5-8)

The reader must be holy, or in the least yearn to be. In ‘The Dedication’ Herbert wrote, calling for the Holy Spirit: ‘*Turn their eyes hither, who shall make a gain: | Theirs, who shall hurt themselves or me, refrain*’ (ll. 5-6). It seems that he meant the poetry of *The Temple* should be read in the ‘same spirit’ as it was written. If not, the reader might run the risk of harming himself, or the poet. Not thrusting his life into the lines, he would harm himself by forfeiting paradise. Not recognizing the true quality of the verse, he might harm the poet by merely regarding the poems superficial features, which indeed may at times even border the banal.

Reading Herbert

From the first publication of *The Temple* in 1633 until the turn of the century, Herbert’s poems were ‘widely popular and often quoted, sometimes, no doubt, as much for their piety as for their poetry’.¹⁷² Both Coleridge and Eliot in their time ‘believed that Christians made the best readers of Herbert’.¹⁷³ In contrast, the essentially secular academic tradition of literary criticism today may be effectively summed up in Vendler’s claim that ‘Herbert’s poetry is as valuable to those who share none of his religious beliefs as to those who share them all’ (p. 4). She points to a contemporary view on Herbert ‘which sees as the primary subject of his poems the workings of his own mind and heart rather than the expression of certain religious beliefs’, stating that although Herbert ‘uses a range of ideas and symbols peculiar to the Christian religion, [*The Temple*] is not thereby limited in meaning to any dogmatic content, nor dependent for its aesthetic success on a reader’s assent to any of the religious premises it embodies’ (p. 4).

Taylor, on the other hand, views with scepticism the tendency to disregard the Christian experience underlying the poetry of *The Temple* altogether:

When treating of devotional poetry in particular, a secular age seems somehow to feel that the Christian experience must be reduced to one arbitrary piece of subject matter among many, and thus made as peripheral as possible, if the universality and artistry of the poem are to go undiminished.¹⁷⁴

He asserts rather critically:

The point is that we cannot read the poetry of George Herbert, the most thoroughly devotional of the seventeenth-century devotional poets, wholly within the tradition of secular poetry, as if his poems differ from secular lyrics

¹⁷² *Works*, p. xlv.

¹⁷³ Vendler, p. 4. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁷⁴ Taylor, p. 1.

only in their subject matter, because Herbert operates on assumptions that are fundamentally different from those of a secular poet.¹⁷⁵

Although I generally agree with Vendler that Herbert's poetry does not require the reader's assent of the author's religious sentiments to achieve aesthetic success, I believe insight to the author's metaphysical framework may shed additional light on the nature of Herbert's markedly devotional poetics. Indeed, such an assumption forms the basis for the present work. In a similar vein, Terry G. Sherwood points out: 'Many secular students of Herbert will find, as I did, that to discover these ingredients [of Herbert's spirituality], however obvious they may seem to historians of spirituality, is to illuminate the poetry of *The Temple*.'¹⁷⁶

The father of Deconstruction, Jacques Derrida claims that due to the 'absent origin' of language our interpretation of any given text is necessarily rendered equivocal, as 'affirmation [...] surrenders itself to *genetic* indetermination, to the *seminal* adventure of the trace'.¹⁷⁷ The inherent plurality of meaning in language was of course not diagnosed by Herbert, at least not in so many words. However, its prefigured 'aporia'¹⁷⁸ forcefully criticized by Abrams is checked even by Herbert, as he claims the agency of the Holy Spirit not only in writing his poems, but advocates its importance in reading the poetry of *The Temple* as well. Herbert's solution to reaching a 'correct' interpretation (or experience) of his poetry is thus evocative of Stanley Fish's Interpretive Communities that enable a shared understanding of a text between critics 'not because he and I share a language, in the sense of knowing the meanings of individual words and the rules for combining them, but because a way of thinking, a form of life, shares us'.¹⁷⁹

3.4 Thesis conclusion

In this thesis I have argued for a poetics of integrity in Herbert, applying the term 'integrity' in the sense of 'an integral whole'.¹⁸⁰ Although a rather technical sense of the word, I believe it to be useful in describing the proposition that 'lines' and 'life' are in *The Temple* considered

¹⁷⁵ Taylor, p. 2.

¹⁷⁶ Terry G. Sherwood, *Herbert's Prayerful Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), p. 4.

¹⁷⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge, 2nd edn, rev. by Nigel Wood (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000), pp. 89-103 (p. 102).

¹⁷⁸ M. H. Abrams, 'The Deconstructive Angel', in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge, 2nd edn, rev. by Nigel Wood (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000), pp. 242-253 (p. 249).

¹⁷⁹ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 303-304.

¹⁸⁰ *OED*, 'integrity' 1. b.

as component parts that together constitute a unity – a whole. This aspect of the poetics of integrity is most clearly treated in chapters two and three.

However, the term ‘integrity’ is descriptive not only of the technical side of Herbert’s poetics. Indeed, it offers a suitable description of the moral standing expected of Herbert’s poet as well. ‘Integrity’ denotes in this sense ‘freedom from moral corruption; innocence, sinlessness’.¹⁸¹ This aspect of Herbert’s poetics of integrity are outlined in chapter one, where the solution to the existential problem of sin is reached, quite naturally for Herbert’s Christian poet, by receiving Salvation – the poet thus reconciled to his position as a child of God.

According to the poetics of integrity, the process of sanctification through suffering and surrender experienced by the poet is to be faithfully translated by the poet into a poem, so that it ‘may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul’,¹⁸² who would ‘thrust his heart | Into these lines’ (‘Obedience’, ll. 42-43), and thus ‘make the purchase spread’ (l. 39). Herbert’s theory of poetry entails, then, a reciprocity first between God and the poet, next between the poet and the poem, and finally between the poem and the reader. It is this markedly relational aspect of the poetics that shines forth as a distinctive feature in Herbert.

What is further remarkable is how the poetics uncovered here are curiously suggestive of relatively modern reader reception theory. Well over three hundred years before Fish launched the idea of the Interpretive Communities, Herbert maintained that the reader and writer of the poems must share a ‘form of life’,¹⁸³ or in the least seek to share in this life,¹⁸⁴ in order for the poem to bring its reader where the author wanted him to arrive: a love of God.

¹⁸¹ *OED*, ‘integrity’ 3.a.

¹⁸² Walton, p. 380.

¹⁸³ Fish, p. 303.

¹⁸⁴ ‘Supelminare’, ll. 5-7.

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